

GOPALLA GRAMAM

Ki. Rajanarayanan

Ki. Rajanarayanan was born in 1923 as the fifth child of Sri Krishna Ramanujam and Lakshmi Ammal at Idaiseval village near Kovilpatti in the Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu. Their ancestors belonged to the Telugu speaking Andhra country.

Ki.Ra., as he is popularly known, was formally educated only till Class Eight. He gathered knowledge outside the precincts of the school by voracious reading and keen and sympathetic observation of the world around him. His creative instincts were whetted by the stories he heard from his father.

Gopalla Gramam, the author's first novel, was published in 1976. Written in a direct manner like a good story teller the author used a people's language to tell a people's tale. The energy and economy of expression and the wealth of descriptive detail, the interesting intertwining of myth and lived reality in telling the story have earned a special place for this work in contemporary Tamil fiction. While the 'casual' reader is well-entertained, which is the story teller's first intention, the 'serious' reader has adequate substance in the novel to trigger his own critical and creative quests. This work is a precursor to developments in Tamil fiction that gathered momentum from the 1990's.

The author was given the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel **Gopallapurattu Makkal** in 1991. The author has more than thirty published works to his credit. Particularly important is his compilation **Vattara Vazhakku Akaradi**, a compilation of Tamil words of local usage in Tamil.

Ki.Ra resides in Puducherry. He is a Visiting Professor in the Dept of Folklore, University of Puducherry.

M.Vijayalakshmi (b. 1948) is a retired Librarian. She has translated the novels and short stories of several contemporary Tamil writers such as Thoppil Meeran, Neela Padmanabhan, D.Dilip Kumar, Jayamohan and others.



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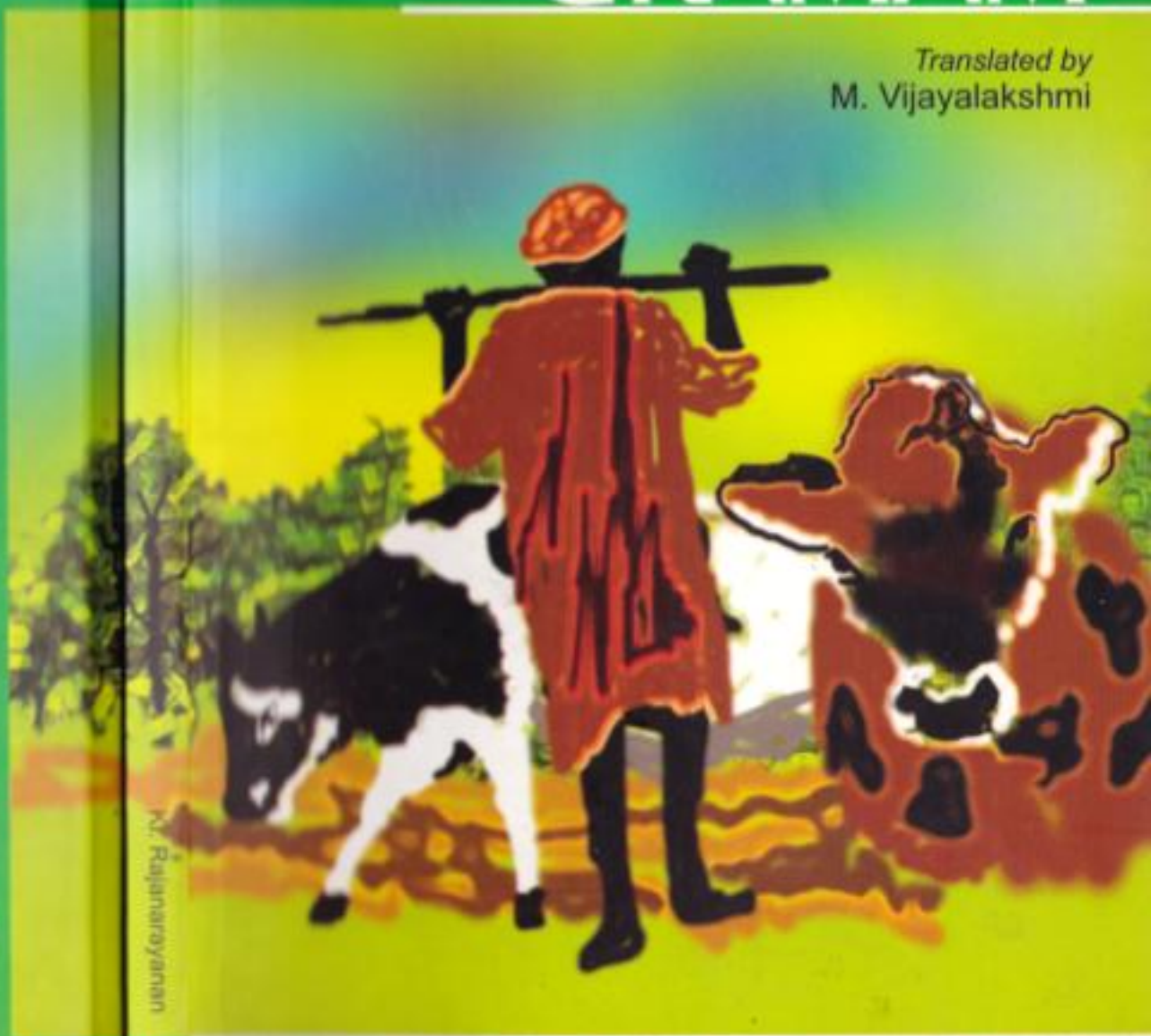
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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

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Sahitya Akademi

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Gopalla Gramam:

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1

The village was in deep slumber. The moon cast a cool silky glow all around.

The western breeze had just subsided. This was the hour when fruit bats returned to their homes having feasted on the figs from trees that grew around the pond. The sounds of nocturnal creatures grew less and less. Cats were returning to human habitations having done with their nightly hunt. Owls and their cousins were reaching for their hollows. Bandicoots were back in their lairs. Crickets had tired themselves out after their night-long droning and had begun to sleep. Dogs curled up having finished their nightly vigil. Night was ready to sleep off and the day about to wake up. The cock, staff-bearer of diurnal creatures flapped its wings and crowed urging the village to wake up. The little black sparrow and the 'tell-tale' sparrow had already sounded off as had the crows.

From the temple floated the sound of the conch and the drum.

The village woke up, stretching, warding off the last vestiges of sleep. A number of sounds blended, with elders waking up younger ones in kind but firm tones, against loving protests. Doors screeched. Some coughed some cleared their throats. One heard the brisk splatter of cowdung water, in front of houses.

The calves were hungry and cried for milk. Mother cows echoed their cries with loud bellowing.

The village was fully awake and began to function with a vital energy.

The older ones set out for the meadow and the children for the street.

Metallic sounds resonated from the village well as pots were lowered, hauled up and tipped accompanied by morning greetings...

A loafing youngster stood leaning against a bare cart, cleaning his teeth, eying the young women near the well...

The mortars inside cattle-sheds came to life as cotton seed was ground, for the cattle.

The village was now bathed in the mild red of the rising sun. The children began their play for the day and the adults went off to attend to their chores.

The Kottaiyar house with its high storey was situated on the western street. Not that the house earned this name from its owner's possession of a *kottai* or fortress. Years ago a mud wall had been built around it, like a fort wall. And the occupants of the house were called Kottaiyar.

The family had once lived very well indeed. Now the house presented a sad sight with visible signs of decay. The broken outer wall recalled to one an ancient ruin. The mortar had turned black and it became blacker when it rained.

No one lived in the first storey. It was home to wild pigeons. This suited the family. Were any guests to arrive in their house they could be treated to dish of a cooked bird. At one time the house had been surrounded by huge trees. These had been chopped for firewood and 'eaten up.'

Even now villagers went past the house with a sense of respect towards the occupants. They would occasionally see the

Kottaiyar folk, with their shrunken bellies and narrow hips, their eyes aglow with nagging hunger.

Virtually destroyed, the Kottaiyar family still exuded a certain majesty. When they walked inside their home their bodies slouched. But in front of the world they would square their shoulders, flare their nostrils and walk with resounding steps.

At the main entrance, the conch, wheel and the namam, symbols of god Vishnu were prominently carved on the wooden frame. One crossed the front yard and entered a long and wide corridor. Here was a chest, as tall as a man, with the signs of Vishnu impressed in brass on the two doors. Once exquisite and invaluable golden ornaments inlaid with gems had filled the chest. Now leather ropes made of buffalo skin, used for tilling, lay inside it, to save them from being nibbled by mice.

In front of the main entrance sat the present master of the house and the village chief, Arasappa Nayakkar, unwaveringly erect, without leaning on the stone pillar. Having sat down in the morning, he continued to sit in the same manner though it was past mid-noon. He could do so from dusk to dawn if needed.

From near and far people would present their cases before him and no day would be an exception. The villagers had broadly two types of cases seeking solutions: those that would be resolved by a person of stature, and those that could be resolved only by a village assembly. Loans, matters of position, security, rivalry, land grabbing, caste fights, blocking of water channels, incendiary acts, labourer's share etc. were taken up and investigated by the assembly. Quarrels that arose within families--inheritance quarrels, husband-wife differences, food and care of the elderly and such other issues were brought before an individual of standing and respect in the village. Some of the knottier problems would take days and even months to resolve. What a judge could not effect, time would.

But the toughest task was to hear the villagers and come to grips with the problem, for each one had his or her own narrative style

The plaintiff would suddenly imagine the judge to be his opponent and proclaim: 'You will neither prosper nor shine. You will be destroyed!'

At such instances Arasappa Nayakkar would smile briefly and lift his left hand to calm down the plaintiff, quite often a woman. The latter would calm down, salute him bending her head and withdraw wiping her tears.

The Kottaiyar men followed the highest norms in resolving cases. Indeed it was a family bequest dating back several generations...

The country was then witnessing the end of the rule of the Paalaya chiefs. The East India Company's writ was yet not present. It was a lawless intermission racked by fear, confusion, arson, loot and theft. People had to safeguard their lives and property by their own means. They apprehended the wrongdoers themselves and punished them.

One day, during those days...

2

It was summer, hot as ever. A woman belonging to the Kammala community, a caste of metal workers, was walking along a certain Mangamma Saalai of a certain village situated on the Kayattaru river. She had left her house in a fit of anger.

The day burned. She looked here and there as she walked, thirsting for a mouthful of water.

Thick clusters of black acacia crowded the horizon. In numerous places creepers with white flowers covered the trees like a carpet, exuding the sweet smell of honey. These were in turn covered below by the red-flowered kovai creepers. The sweet smell made one drowsy. Crickets droned on a high note. The air had expanded in the intense heat. As a result the feeblest of sounds became audible with an extraordinary clarity as though those sounds were being heard for the first time.

Her tongue felt dryer and dryer. She had covered her head with a sari to hide the heavy golden pambadams that weighed down her ear-lobes and as a shade against the sun. Her clothes were wet with perspiration. Thirst and loneliness assailed her. She ensured that her head stayed covered by clenching the cloth with her teeth. This too seemed to dry up her mouth. As she walked on she heard the parrots screeching at a particular spot. She guessed that there would be greenery and water close-by. From where she stood she could see two tracks, one to the east and one to the west. Her feet stepped into one without deliberate choice.

Soon she could see marks that indicated the presence of a water source. Tall and healthy jamun trees came into sight. A water-fowl and her chicks hid themselves in a bush as they spotted her. She could see tall bulrush reeds with efflorescences resembling ears of millets. She heard the typical call of the Kaduvaali bird - 'Kutticer aa kutticer' - 'Come back, little one'.

The path led to a pond not far from Mangamma Saalai. She would have reached the spot even if she had walked on.

This pond did not dry up even in the hottest of summers. The water was as sweet as the nectar inside a coconut kernel. It was Mother Nature's gift to the passer-by.

Much happened, in general, near a water source. Water was a precious gift. If such a gift remained isolated anything could happen.

The crab had dug out a hole for its own needs. But the kuravai fish often entered it as the water would be almost level with the hole and tiny waves would ebb and flow into the hole. The kuravai loved to eat the worms that lived in the slush. The egret loved to eat the kuravai and stood on one leg, waiting. The fox waited slyly for the latter.

Even the hunter liked to wait near the water. The animals had to come here for a drink of water wherever they might be roaming or hiding. The animals too waited near the water for their prey. The struggle for life did not end with the day. It continued into the night. The pole cat hunted at night for birds and it prowled on the trees near the pond. A violent fight would ensue between the pole cat and the toddy cat. The pond was witness to the day-and-night event of life feeding on life each day and every day.

The woman was rushing towards the pond. A man watched her not taking his eyes off even for a split second. He too was out to hunt.

She felt an urge to throw herself on the ground, level with

the water, and drink directly rather than take sips from cupped palms. She gathered her sari and tucked it. Quickly she entered the water and drank mouthfuls. She splashed herself, on the face and neck with the cool liquid. She immersed her face in her cupped palms. Her actions recalled to one the pleasure derived by a mother when she pressed her face on her baby's soft belly.

The 'hunter' had eyes for nothing other than her golden pambadams. He began to move towards her.

Sensing a movement she turned her face, and saw him approaching her. Not the least afraid or apprehensive she smiled and said, "So wonderful, this water, so delicious, as though I am hugging a puppy!" Perhaps her innocence did affect him a little for he smiled a crooked smile. He was however more intent on achieving his task.

"Quietly remove those pambadams and give them to me. If you shout I shall drown you right here!" He spoke quickly and repeated his words threateningly.

The woman froze with fear. She could not move her lips or her limbs. Her cupped palms stayed that way, as though begging him for kindness. Water dripped from them.

Her fear-stricken eyes and silence impelled him to act fast. Afraid of being seen he pushed her inside the water. It was neither her mother nor god that she cried out for.

"Ammano....ov!" Water entered her mouth and nose.

Planting his feet on her in the water he removed her pambadams and tucked them in the waist fold.

At this moment, two things happened, totally unforeseen.

As he pressed down his feet on her face under water she bit the big toe of his right foot. The bite became stiffer and stiffer.

An ox-cart stopped there.

3

A well-built man was driving the ox-cart. The cart left Mangamma Saalai and turned gently descending towards the pond.

The driver of that cart was Krishnappa Nayakkar. With practiced skill he tugged at the rope and lowered the cart into the pond. The oxen drank water greedily. Krishnappa Nayakkar held the reins close to his chest and stared hard at him. The latter too observed him carefully while affecting a vacant look.

He had tied his waist cloth with a woven belt. The hair in his broad chest grew straight up, not down. The nose declared that he was short of temper. Below the moustache were firm lips stained by betel. His calloused hands were testimony that they were used to hard tasks. His back and arms rippled with hard muscles. Long legs with large feet dangled from either side of the seat.

He lowered the cart into the water to cool the iron strip around the wheels. But the wheels got stuck in the mud. He got down, placed his hands on a spoke and tried to push it forward. This proved to be difficult. He now called to him for help standing in waist-deep water. The latter stood as though he was hard of hearing.

He did not know how to leave the water. Her teeth clung to his big toe and her body followed him when he put his foot forward.

Using all his strength Krishnappa Nayakkar turned the cart. He then paused and looked at him. The latter stared fixedly at him without any movement. Krishnappa Nayakkar splashed water on the iron strips. He also looked at him every now and then.

Now he spoke of his own. 'The heat is excessive. That is why I am standing like this in water.'

Krishnappa Nayakkar made no response to this explanation. He merely heard him and went on with his task. The water that hit the wheel each time from his palms was a troughful. It created an eerie sound as it fell down the spokes. It was as though a spirit was hauling water, not a man.

His silent manner and brute strength made his stomach churn.

Another man arrived on the scene, just then. He was dark, thin and short. He had covered his head with his upper cloth. A white sacred thread was clearly visible on his dark body.

He addressed the two: "Did you happen to see a woman passing by in these parts?"

Krishnappa Nayakkar who had just finished splashing water on the metal gave him a questioning look. The man repeated his question clearing his choking throat. He continued, "She was angry about something and left our home in a huff. She was wearing pambadams and was wearing a red kandangi sari. She was pregnant." He sounded pitiful.

'I am responsible for all this', his voice seemed to suggest. "My good men, did you see her? I am told that she was walking this road just a while ago."

Krishnappa Nayakkar was driving the cart from the north. This man was coming from the south, searching for her. How could she have disappeared, without a trace? For no reason in particular he felt suspicious about the man standing in the

water. 'He ought to know, he ought to.'

Krishnappa Nayakkar enquired the new man of his caste. The latter told him that he was a goldsmith, an achari.

"Well, achariyare, do not worry. Just hold this cart. We will keep it in the shade and search for her."

Nayakkar jumped on to his seat and reined in the animals. The achari tied the upper cloth round his head, caught hold of a spoke and pushed it. The wheel moved a little but it was again caught in the slush.

The achari called out: "Come on give me a hand. What are you standing there for, holding onto something beneath the water?" But the man wouldn't budge.

Nayakkar jumped off the cart. Placing his hands on his hip he stared hard at him narrowing his eyes. He called him in a peremptory manner, without ado. "You, you come here."

He removed one of the seat frames. The man was stricken with fear as he beheld the enormous rage of the man.

This was the essential Nayakkar. When others got furious they would take out the oonkambu, one of the oblong bamboo poles in the cart on which a roof was fixed, if needed. But he would take out the bamboo frames used to 'even out' the driver's seat. His elder brother Govindappa Nayakkar would get hold of a pestle, when he lost his temper. The stalwart that he was, the pestle would look like a harmless metal-handled stick in his hand. Their father Naranappa Nayakkar preferred to beat with a yoke stud. He was famous for his quick temper.

"Are you coming here or should I come over?" he said.

His immobility provoked him to lunge forward at him. The latter stepped aside to avert the huge blow aimed at him. The frame hit the water with an explosive sound and split into two.

Nayakkar marched back and removed the second seat frame. 'You wretch, I won't let you go, and well might you try. You

think you have been spared? Wait, here I come," he shouted like one possessed.

The man limped on one foot and quickly came towards the bank and out of the pond. He staggered to the ground. He sat with one leg bent, using his hand for support. The other leg was still in the water. He now folded his hands above his head before Krishnappa Nayakkar in abject surrender.

What was it that was inside the water, now visible, now not — beneath the stretched leg — neither man could guess. The achari then saw a pambadam shining by the side of the 'grounded' man.

He knew instantly whose it was. He was a craftsman by tradition. That pambadam had been made by him and none other.

He now recognized the body too. Nayakkar now planted the bamboo frame in the ground. He stepped into the water and dragged out the body.

The killer tried hard to rid his leg of the corpse. His efforts were of no use. The teeth had sunk into the toe. Krishnappa Nayakkar took out a curved knife from his waist-fold and cut off the toe.

He screamed in pain as his toe was severed. Nayakkar hit him hard on his chest with his elbow causing a pain so violent that even the involuntary expression of vocal sound ceased, though he continued to open and close his mouth.

After he cut off the toe, Krishnappa Nayakkar brought a thick rope from the cart, tied his hands behind in a tight knot. He lifted him bodily and tied him to the spokes. Blood dripped continuously from where his toe had been severed.

The woman lay there, a scary picture — teeth bared in a 'smile' with a toe held between them like a piece of sugarcane, earlobes torn and eyes wide open.

The achari stood like one frozen. Nayakkar made him sit. He picked up the dagger coated with blood and sand, and walked fast towards the village. As he turned around the path his heart shook as he heard the loud wailing of the achari:

“Never did I think you’d die like this, woman....Ayyo! Ayyo! And why am I still alive? Why am I not dead...”

He beat himself hard on the face and fell upon her, his body contorting like a helpless worm.

“You would say that it was a sin to kill even an ant. How could one have the heart to kill you ... Ayyo?”

The male voice sounded heavy and unbecoming, when it happened to belong to a man weeping loudly, felt Nayakkar.

4

Govindappa Nayakkar had just finished his meal and was sitting on a stone slab under the neem tree in the front yard, chewing betel leaves. Urkudumban, their farm help and chief of the Pallar community of the village, was standing in the shade of the wall, hands across his chest, as a mark of respect. He would always be seen there, like a statue, whether or not there was work for him.

Govindappa Nayakkar began to prepare leaves for another round of chewing. At one time he chewed five betel nuts.

Normally one nut was sufficient for one person. It was a rare man who chewed two.

Govindappa Nayakkar placed five large nuts in front of him. He spread out a sheaf of leaves, sweet lime and white tobacco, like a shop counter.

First he put three nuts into his mouth. He rubbed lime separately on each leaf. He took three leaves together, rolled them tight and crunched them. As he chewed the strong jaw line was more than visible.

When he spat out the excess juice in a stream, it fell afar and not one drop fell midway. In a single sitting he would demolish five betel nuts and a half sheaf of leaves.

“Do you know why we betel-eaters spit? So that we can chew more” he’d say.

Emptying his mouth of the chewed remnants, he got ready for a third round. One needed to chew a minimum of ten rounds to ensure that one got that sought-after 'good' feeling. When the betel 'got' one, one would just know it. That smell was so distinct.

Govindappa Nayakkar slid his hand into the betel nut box and picked a clutch of nuts, eyes closed. He wanted to see only five nuts in his hand. His fingers were however counting them, against his will. 'No, that's wrong. One should just get a handful and then count. This is not fair. He opened his hand to throw the nuts back. At that moment he felt that someone was standing before him. 'Should I pick up the nuts and then see or...' he considered. However his eyes had opened on their own!

Govindappa was shocked to see his younger brother, holding a blood-soaked weapon.

Krishnappa Nayakkar related the events quickly

Govindappa Nayakkar immediately ordered Urkudumban to rush to the spot with his catapult, a trusted weapon that was always kept tucked in his waist band.

"Urkudumba, we do not know if he is alone or is part of a gang. First of all, he should not escape. Secondly, the Achari should not harm him, out of rage. You start, we are following you."

Kudumban removed the catapult from the waist. Once he held it in his hand he was a changed man. Veeralakshmi, the goddess of courage would instantaneously make her radiant presence in his face. One would find it difficult to relate this man to the servile creature that had stood as one with the wall in total humility.

In those days when the gun had not come into use,

Kudumban's catapult was the source of innumerable feats. His unerring aim at the source of a sound in utter darkness was the stuff of legends.

A running hare could not escape his aim. When he hunted the mountain pig he would announce where it would be hit and where it would fall. He would land a flying bird to display his prowess. He would use a range of weights, from the flimsiest of stones to something as heavy as a coconut. The stone would emit a loud sound as it flew towards the target, if he so fixed it. Or it would sail silently so that the enemy couldn't anticipate the direction from where it might arrive. After he left, the brothers exchanged smiles at his self-assurance.

Govindappa Nayakkar told his brother to first inform the VIPs of the village before everyone was called to assemble. That done, he set off with a few young men to bring the killer.

As soon as his brother left his presence Govindappa Nayakkar put his hand into the betel nut box and brought out the nuts. "Kaliyuga at its worst now" he muttered to himself.

One day Govindappa Nayakkar was chewing betel and tobacco and stitching together banyan leaves. People of the 'Karisal bhumi' ('Charred earth') used less of banana leaves and more of such leaf plates when they observed ritual austerities. On normal days they ate in brass alloy bowls or plates, or wooden dishes.

Govindappa Nayakkar found this to be a pleasant pastime. The nail of his left thumb was long and sharp and was very useful in taking out strands of fibre from dry corn stalks

He would tell Urkudumban to bring banyan leaves, and stitch them in varied shapes. He would close his eyes and stitch the leaves and then open his eyes to see the result. Suddenly he

would imagine that he was a blind man, deserted by his brothers and orphaned by the death of dear ones. Poor and alone he had no way of fending for himself except by stitching leaves, he would imagine. With tears streaming from his eyes he would stitch the leaves. A thought would now occur and he would introduce a correction in the scenario. No, he had not been orphaned...no, no...he was better as an orphan...And Urkudumban? Should he be by his side or not? He burst out laughing! Who could bring the leaves, climbing the banyan tree, but Kudumban!

Wiping his tears he looked around. Luckily he had not been observed by anyone. Now he decided to imagine a different scene and at that point Urkudumban arrived, with a piece of news. And the news was that the village was to be raided by torch-wielding dacoits.

“Isn’t this the umpteenth time that you have warned us?” laughed Nayakkar. Kudumban retorted “Yes, umpteen times. And what if they raid when we are not prepared?”

“Well, well, that is also right. Nothing wrong in our remaining alert.”

He shut his eyes. He thought over anything with his eyes closed, as a habit.

He then told him: “There is no path leading up here. If we know for sure about their route you would suffice for us, why tell the village at all?” When Kottaiyar heaped such praise on him Kudumban shrank several inches, feeling shy.

Akkayya arrived there as this talk went on. He was related to the Kottaiyar family by marriage. He was rather short and was forty years old but did not look it. He was a bachelor. He wore his hair in a top knot. Except when he was engaged in work he wore his upper cloth across his chest. Women found his appearance amusing and they suppressed their laughter with

difficulty. He walked with a nimble gait, never planting his heels on the ground. His face displayed a perpetual look of innocence.

Though younger to Govindappa Nayakkar, the latter addressed him politely as ‘Mama’, maternal uncle. He was an employee of the Kottaiyar household.

5

In those days guests would spend at least one month with their hosts. Perhaps because one walked all the way from one place to another or because of the distances involved. The guest would not leave soon and the host would not let him do so. Visitors to the Kottaiyar house spent two or three months with them as a rule.

In the kitchen a huge cauldron was embedded above a fire. It would always be full of water. The fire was lit two or three times in the day and the water was always hot. The guests had a hot bath and ate whatever was available in the kitchen.

The kitchen chimney belched smoke round the clock. It was a perpetually busy house, with women drawing water from the well, chopping vegetables, making pickles or drying fritters, or pounding kammam grass for their cattle. Older women would grind millet with uniform speed. Several grinding stones would be seen ready for use with wet cloth stretched on the grinding surfaces for husking whole grain.

Close to the northern part of the house was the cattle shed, with local breeds of buffalos, cows and strong oxen, busy eating their feed their neck bells tinkling all the while. Two stone troughs, each long enough for one man to lie down, were filled with water for the animals. Tall mortars were placed in the shed for grinding cotton seed.

The Kottaiyar were a joint family. Akkayya supervised the entire family. He would be here, there, everywhere. The women

teased him that his sole was imprinted with the symbol of the wheel.

The youngest master was Kannappa Nayakkar alias Chellappillai, the beloved of the household. He performed the following chores:

- Carry an iron ladle with burning coals to the shed, remove the vermin on the cattle with a pair of pincers and burn them in the coals;
- Fill up the small stone troughs kept especially for their two pedigree dogs with a good quantity of fresh milk and watch them slurp it up
- Pluck leaves from the podutalai that grew near water sources, with its small rounded soft leaves, fry chicken eggs, mix the two and feed turkey chicks
- Caging the civet cats and collecting their perfume
- Feeding soaked grain to fighter cocks
- Cutting off fronds from young palms making a variety of fans and presenting them to his favourites.

Apart from these chores his most cherished pastime was singing. Kannappa sang sweetly and his voice was like the sound of a conch. He would be always humming a raga. He was fond of women and equally fond of unfermented toddy. He knew a number of erotic Telugu ditties and was the cynosure of a number of village women, especially the younger ones.

Sundarappa was immediately older to Chellappillai. He was devoted to buffaloes, to a point of obsession. He took extra care of a particular male, which was the size of a small elephant. He was particularly fond of unleashing his favourite animal on the females.

Akkayya affectionately called him by the name of the mythological sage Visvamitra and often explained why he called him so. When Brahma created the Universe he created

only cows. Visvamisra, who created a rival universe created buffaloes as against cows, bandicoots for mice and so on. He would thus poke fun at Sundarappa citing one thing or the other and its 'rival'.

The Kottaiyar brothers were seven in number. All the seven were born to Naranappa's first wife Kondamma. His second wife Rangamma had only one daughter, called Mangamma.

The seven brothers managed seven 'departments':

The eldest, Govindappa Nayakkar was overall supervisor.

The second son Krishnappa Nayakkar took care of their crops.

The third son Govindappa took care of the cows.

Ramappa Nayakkar the fourth son minded their goat and sheep.

The fifth brother Dasappa Nayakkar was the family representative for social occasions, sad and happy, in and around the village.

The sixth son Sundarappa took care of the buffaloes.

Chellappillai Kannappa Nayakkar stayed at home and did the chores as already said.

The Kottaiyar house had two front entrances and two side entrances that were connected to the cattle sheds. Like other houses in Gopallapuram the house had no back gate. At the back of the house were numerous neem trees. In the summer months they would be adorned by bitter-sweet flower clusters. Akkayya called the neem tree 'Veppamma' or neem-woman, who was dressed in green and white. When the seeds appeared he declared that Veppamma was wearing 'kunukku', a dangling ear ornament. When the *vagai* tree cast off its leaves, keeping only the pods to itself, he would remark: "This tree is without shame. It stands naked, shedding everything".

Along the raised front of the house were four windows, as

tall as a man. From the northern most window one could see in a separate room, an ancient woman sitting on a rope cot. A bag of skin and bones with an emphatic nose, this elder reminded one of an old eagle that had shed all its feathers. This ancient lady was Mangatayaru Ammal, all of a hundred and thirty seven years.

She was leaning against a leather bolster stuffed with silk cotton. Her head was bent. She held her hands together, touching her belly, as though she was in prayer. Her ears were adorned by a pair of cart wheel shaped ornaments held in place with gold links.

The grand old lady had not slept for years. Occasionally she dozed off, sitting, her nap as brief as a hen's. Sometimes one could hear her feeble voice. If the sound came twice Govindappa Nayakkar would rush into the room to find the reason. Pootti their great grandmother could still hear, and not too badly at that. Since she had no teeth only those who knew her well could understand what her voice conveyed.

"Govindappa", she would say, and make him sit close to her and gently stroke his arm. She would do that to anyone who came and sat next to her. Her touch conveyed a lot of affectionate enquiries. 'I hope you are fine, how is your health, why didn't you come to me earlier, I can not stay without you...' and so on.

'Why have you become so thin, Child?' she would tell a hefty person. 'Eat well. Do you take ghee with you meals? Do you have oil massage and head bath regularly, do you eat a good quantity of curd every morning, drink a good quantity of buttermilk. Do you take castor oil regularly as a laxative.' Thus she went on, with her enquiries.

Pootti had stopped eating a proper meal years ago. All that she ate now was only palm molasses and curds.

When those shaking hands touched him Govindappa

Nayakkar's body would erupt into goose pumps and his eyes would be covered by a film of tears.

"What day is it today and which star is in the ascendant" she would ask him. She was always confused about these details, perhaps because of her sleeping in the day and waking at night.

She had narrated many a wonderful event that had occurred in her childhood, youth and old age. There were many events that she had yet not completed telling and those that she never related. Govindappa Nayakkar was immensely happy to hear her tales. Some he heard and enjoyed repeatedly. Poottiyammal was an encyclopaedia of experience of a life lived full.

She had come with the Kammavar a Telugu agricultural caste who had left the Andhra country for the Tamil land. When she recounted the trials and tribulations that they had been through, she would become emotional. Tears would be shed copiously or she would laugh heartily.

When she felt overwhelmed by the recollection of things gone by, her two hands would be held above her in salutation to god and she would start singing. Those sitting near her would then quietly disburse and that day her narrative would end at that point.

6

Apart from the Kammavar, the Reddys, Kambalattar and Brahmins migrated from Andhra and settled here, as did the professional castes, like goldsmiths and cobblers.

There were many reasons for their arriving here. They came looking to better their conditions when these parts were also under the rule of Telugu kings. They were probably frightened of alien rulers as well.

According to Mangatayaaru Ammal the word Kammavar derived from the word 'kamma' a kind of ear ornament preferred by their women folk. She also related a story as to their ancestor.

In the Nagarjuna Hills resided a brave Rakshasa girl, who could be defeated by no one. A bold and handsome Brahmin lad subdued her and dragged her along literally by the nose with a 'toratti' or hook, put through her nostril. The rakshasi began to wear this as her choice ornament. And to this day, our women, whose ancestor she was, wear the toratti, she'd say.

"Tell me now, a second time, the story of your coming from the Andhra country" Govindappa Nayakkar would tell her. This was but one of the numerous 'second times' that he had requested her.

Mangatayaru Ammal was one who ought to have become a poetess. Her view of things in general and her style of relating them, whetting them well in her mind, had great charm.

Akkayya and Govindappa Nayakkar were greatly enamoured of that story. She too was in love with it and her own telling of it. In her frail condition, moreover, that was all that she could do.

Whenever Govindappa Nayakkar made his request Mangatayaru's relaxed face would become more and more tense and her eyes would focus at things far away in her mind's canvas. The face would then relax, a wee bit. She would be then assailed by a variety of emotions that would constrict her throat. After clearing her throat she would begin her tale.

"Chenna was my cousin sister, daughter of my father's elder brother. She was six years older to me. I was nine. Goyindappa, I am so old. Till date I have not come across a girl of such beauty and charm.

A glow would surround Chenna Devi wherever she might be. Perhaps because it was a full moon night that she was born on, her face had a compelling charm.

Just as the cows of a certain country have their looks and purity of features special to that soil, so also it is for humans. Chenna Devi was just as beautiful as the goddess of beauty of that land.

Her beauty was known not only in the near-by villages but in far away places as well. And this fame bode ill for her.

And her voice, so sweet it was! Once she began to sing, the very creation became still. The breeze stopped flowing and the creepers would lie still. Our bodies would feel lighter and would begin to float in the air as it were. Our hearts would brim with boundless joy just like the full waters of a big tank.

Rarely would she laugh a full-throated laugh. And one longed for a repeat of such an occurrence. And the variety of those moments!

She would smile with her eyes, her brows extending her full cooperation.

She would smile from the edge of her eyes. Or she would look straight and smile with not a single muscle twitching, or smile looking towards the floor – and it was the most beautiful of her smiles. She would turn her eyes around, fluttering her eyelids like a bird flapping its wings and smile – her eyes glittered at that moment. Sometimes she would slightly flare her nostrils and bring up a smile there too!

When her lips revealed a smile, the mouth would look several times more beautiful than it already was. When she bit her lips to suppress one they crossed the dividing line between a light red to a much deeper hue, like the blood of a sparrow.

A single pearl dangled from her bullakku just above the upper lip. When she smiled, her teeth flashing, a competition raged between her teeth and the pearl. One had to applaud the goldsmith who decided to dangle that pearl to prove a point about pretty teeth!

Then it happened, just before she attained puberty.

They decided to make a necklace of red rubies. A few were already with them but they fell short of the required number. They were intending to buy these, when those men visited their town. They were gem merchants.

Chenna's father asked them if they had red stones to sell. He called them to their house and showed them what he had so that he might buy more of the same, if they happened to have them. But those Turks were stunned by what they saw. They wanted to know from where they had bought them. Chenna's father replied that he did not know of that, and that the stones had been in the family for generations.

Those merchants struggled to snatch their eyes off those stones that seemed to have lit up the whole house. They selected a few from the lot, placed them in their palms and walked into the sunlit front yard and marveled at their beauty, turning them this way and that. Their faces wreathed in smiles and they spoke

out loud words of appreciation in their own tongue. It seemed that each was trying to convince the other that the stones held in his palm were the best.

Chenna Devi came to the spot, quite unexpectedly. Their turbans and trimmed beards, their bulging eyeballs and their strange guttural speech provoked peels of laughter from her!

The older of the two men looked in the direction from where this sweet sound had reached his ears. He stared and stared again, rubbing his eyes, seeking to confirm if what he saw was indeed real. Chenna was so amused by his demeanour that those peels continued as though strands of pearls were being flung, one upon the other.

That day Chenna was wearing a blue silk pavadaï and a saffron silk dhavani with golden dots. She was also wearing a waist belt studded with diamonds.

The merchants, who had already struggled hard to take their eyes off the rubies were now in far worse plight, having beheld a rare jewel of womanly beauty.

The older man raised his eyes and hands heavenward as though praying to god, muttering in his strange tongue and gestured as though he sought god's blessing on Chenna. And that was not unusual on the part of that old man. Anyone seeing Chenna for the first time ended up resorting to such odd gestures.

Once, when we paid a visit to a temple, a man stood with folded hands till she was out of his range of vision.

Something even more interesting happened when we were quite small. It was mid noon. Chenna and I were being carried in a palanquin through the forest path and not a soul was in sight. We were returning after accompanying her mother to her parental home. Chenna had made me sit close to her and was telling me one of those stories that all children enjoyed. Two

flies were getting married. And what jewelry did the groom wear and what did the bride wear? Chenna gave a detailed account. The bride was wearing so much around her neck that she could hardly turn. She was keen to see the groom's face but all that jewelry around her neck impeded this. And then, paused Chenna. And at that very moment the palanquin shook. As I hugged her much shouting and screaming began. We could make out that the palanquin was being lowered on the ground.

There were openings in the palanquin through which one could see outside. We had been surrounded by dacoits, and they were a frightening sight indeed! They wore black dhotis tucked between their legs. Built like baby elephants their bodies were unwashed and caked with mud. Brownish fuzz covered their bare bodies and heads that had probably been never touched with oil. Their moustaches were long as a squirrel's tail and their eyes bulged out. Each one held a stave.

"Will you open the palanquin or shall I?" a gruff voice was heard, that scared the very wits out of me. Chenna Devi quietly looked at him through a hole.

A perfect round dot of vermillion was visible on his forehead. Beneath it was a streak of sandal paste. A string of tulasi beads adorned his neck. He was wearing a dark blue dhoti pleated and tucked between the legs. A length of yellow silk upper cloth was draped across his shoulders. He held a gleaming sword of medium length. A stalwart he was, every inch of him.

It was quiet for a moment. None knew what awaited them.

Without the slightest hint Chenna Devi got out of the palanquin and looked calmly at the whole lot of men with a steadfast smile on her lips. Light flashed from the big diamond in her bullakku.

7

The dacoit leader walked slowly towards Devi. The smell of camphor wafted from him. The man did not take his eyes off her lacquered feet. He then planted the tip of his sword on the ground and bent before her placing one knee on the ground. His hands were folded on to the sword handle. He lowered his head and closed his eyes. Then getting up he moved two steps back and stood, eyes still closed as though he was in meditation. He then called out to a certain Bomma in a choked tearful tone, his voice low.

One of his men who had worn a chain around his waist instead of a leather belt changed the stave from his right hand to the left. Keeping it well behind his back he put his right hand to the mouth and walked towards his leader and stood to his left.

“Escort these people to the end of the forest” he ordered and continued to stand in the same manner.

The crowd made way for him. Bomman held the stave close to his chest and ushered us into the palanquin with utmost respect.

Chenna Devi came inside and sat next to me with the same degree of dignity. As soon as the door was shut the journey resumed. “Chellee, you were frightened, weren’t you!” Devi hugged me, laughing. We knew much later that he was Mallayya the dreaded dacoit. Were we shocked when we knew this!

‘Goyindappa, countless were the murders and dacoities committed by that man.

The reason for his not killing Chenna Devi or robbing her jewelry was her divine beauty – it was beauty that deserved worship.

Mallayya was no doubt a dacoit but he was also god-fearing, one who saw in every woman a mother. Perhaps he saw in Chenna the valour exuded by Chandika Devi whose devotee he was.

But, Goyindappa, a girl of such extraordinary beauty can never lead a peaceful life. The very beauty that brought her fame also carried sorrow in its wake. Sorrow to her, her family, even their society.’ Pootti paused for a brief rest and continued.

‘More men visited Chenna’s house. Ostensibly they were gem merchants and they did have what the family was looking for. Chenna’s father was good at appraising stones. With the help of the goldsmith he selected the gems.

The merchants then told him that they already had a gem-encrusted necklace that they could show him if he so wished...

As he took it from them to have a look, Periyappa was stunned! He then said ‘This is not meant for humans – its rightful place is the temple.’ He made up his mind to buy it with the intention of placing it at the feet of Alamelumanga, the reigning goddess of Tirupati.

But the price was out of their reach. At that point Chenna’s grandmother expressed a desire to try it on Chenna before returning it. Periyappa opposed this wish. It was wrong he said, to try on something they did not intend to buy, that the old lady’s wish was morally wrong. But who wouldn’t succumb to desire!

“Amma, we are after all going to make a necklace for her. Please listen to me” he repeated.

“You keep quiet” she told her son and called out for her Aparanji. That was the name she used for her favourite grandchild.

Chenna had been observing everything standing near the window. She came out when grandmother held the necklace in her hands.

Her beauty doubled when she wore that necklace.

Grandmother warded off the evil eye by swiping Chenna's cheeks with her palms in quick motion and cracking her knuckles.

'Goyindappa, we were duped into believing that those men were genuine merchants. We did not know that they were the personal servants of the Turki king who was then ruling over us.

The next day did not dawn for our family and friends the right way. Very early in the morning the king's soldiers and closed palanquins arrived in front of our house. We had been surrounded in advance so that we were prevented from running away. The king's men told us that they stood around to display respect for us!

The king's messenger was an elderly man who looked like a Brahmin. He called my Periyappa and showed him the gems, jewelry, pearls and silks heaped inside the closed litters. He requested him to accept all these bestowals from the king. And who in this world refused a king's gifts?

But we very well knew of the consequences that followed the acceptance of such 'bestowals.'

It was quickly proven that our fears were justified. The visitors asked Chenna Devi's hand for the muslim king. That old brahmin said 'Appayi, don't feel afraid. The king wants to marry your daughter and make her his queen. Lady Luck awaits you and your family. Don't think twice about it.'

Periyappa did not speak a word.

He kept looking at the brahmin. The latter took a quick look around and muttered something in a low voice, audible only to Periyappa, putting his arm on his shou'lder. "Even if you refuse

he is going to take away your daughter. Leave everything to god's will and say yes."

Periyappa pushed his hand away from his shoulder.

Chenna's mother, ever so proud of her child now wept and wished that she had not been such a charmer.

No one spoke. No one ate or drank. Not even a death in the family could have induced such a state of mourning.

The elders thought and thought but they could arrive at no conclusion. They could have swallowed something and died but that was not going to happen, since they had been surrounded. And they remained surrounded though they told them that they needed time to give them a reply.

Grandmother took Periyappa and Periyamma to the Pooja room. They held one another and wept silently.

But how long could they cry?

Grandmother now drew out the lamp wick to make the flame burn brighter. She stood in the direction of holy Tirupati with folded hands.

She hailed Srinivasamurthi, the Lord of the Seven Hills and fell on the floor in abject surrender to His will. She then took two betel leaves. She placed a red arali flower in one and jasmine flower and tulasi in the other. She wound the leaves and cast them before the lamp.

Grandmother then called me by my name Mangatayaru. I bowed down to the goddess of the lamp, picked one leaf and gave it to her.

We waited with bated breath as she opened the leaf. It had jasmine and basil! "Bhagawane... What you wish for us you alone know! We cannot understand anything our lord!" said grandmother. Shedding tears she touched the flowers and the tulasi to her eyes with reverence and gave them to Periyappa.

8

The maids from the palace dressed up Chenna Devi. Among the numerous ornaments that adorned her neck the gem encrusted necklace sent by the king looked the best, as though it was made just for her. It suited her so well. She was born to become a queen. All that was needed was a crown to adorn her head.

A little distance from the palace tents had been erected close to several pavilions for the family and friends to stay. The air had a hint of rain for it was the monsoon season.

It was early night. The marriage was to take place the following morning. The long journey had made everyone tired and hungry.

Thick palm trees had been cut down to waist-high lengths and large metal bowls had been placed on them with oil and thick wicks. Each lamp provided enough light for five camps.

Some of us, curious to explore around this camp meandered into the area where the kitchen had been set up. We saw, in a corner, a big inverted basket. One of us ventured to lift it to see what lay inside. The sight was truly shocking - it was the severed head of a cow!

Heaven forbid! So this was the food being cooked for us. Come what may, we swore to ourselves, we have to run away. But we wouldn't let them have even a whiff of our decision.

We went 'out' in small groups to attend to our body needs,

as planned. Chenna's dress was removed and she wore ordinary clothes. The clothes and jewelry given by the Turki king were kept in the camp safe from prying eyes. We assembled in a grove far from the inhabited area.

We were not followed since no one suspected anything. Half the group was to return and stay in the camp and other half was to flee the place with Chenna Devi. If the former were requested to eat dinner they would tell them that they were observing a ritual fast that night and that they would eat only in the morning. They would escape when everyone was fast asleep.

We walked quietly in the forest. We had planned to go southward. But we could hardly make out which way we were going. Clouds covered the sky and no star was visible. Rain was expected any moment.

We walked at our fastest. Although the ground was full of thorns, not one pierced our feet. The lightning and thunder did not put fear into us. Our backs tingled as though someone was charging behind us with a sword in his hand. When lightning lit up the forest we felt happy for it showed us the way. But we were also worried at the same time that we might be exposed to our tormentors.

At last we were absolutely sure that our legs could take us no further and we sat down.

Periyappa told grandmother: "Amma, you cannot walk any further. There may be a village nearby and there may be some good people of the Hindu community. I shall go find out and request them to give you refuge. You stay here quietly. Be brave. I think that it will be dawn quite soon." He was breathless and tired. Grandmother could not say anything for she was exhausted. She merely put her hand on his mouth to make him quiet. After getting a hold on herself she said "Appayi, you cannot leave us for even a minute. A better choice would be that you kill us with your own hand. Son, this is a

moment when we shouldn't part. Be it life, be it death, He is our only guide." She stretched her hands above her head in salutation to God.

Chenna Devi sat next to grandmother like a worn-out deer calf. Grandmother made her lie down placing her head on her lap with much affection. She patted her 'Golden Aparanji'. She said 'Seeta was born and Lanka was destroyed. Is the muslim king about to perish now that you have been born?' Her voice choked as she spoke.

Periyappa's laughter was soaked in sorrow. 'It doesn't seem to be so. The muslim kingdom is nowhere close to destruction. It is we who are perishing.' he said.

Far away one could see rows of lighted torches like fire-breathing devils. Soon human voices could be keened.

Periyamma said that they were chasing us. We began to run again, like hunted animals. We would have died happily, had our lungs burst. The sky was getting lighter and lighter. It could rain any moment.

When the sky shed its darkness we found that we had reached a river. It was in spate, with swirling waters lapping the banks. We could no more run ahead. If a boat or a boatman could be sighted we could reach the other bank for some respite. As we stood dumbstruck, we could make out the figures of armed men on horseback approaching us very fast.

We decided that we should jump into the swollen river rather than be caught by the Turk...' At this point of the story Pootti's face wore an expression of extraordinary exultation.

'Goyindappa...Goyindappa...It was then that this miracle happened....

A huge peepal tree, on the opposite bank, as tall as a temple tower, bent towards us, on this side. First we thought that the tree had been uprooted and thus falling across the river. Its branches touched the shore stayed thus for a while and then it

straightened up. Then it struck us that this was divine intervention. The one who guessed this the fastest was grandmother. The tree bent once more towards us. "My children, my folk, hold on to the branches of the tree. It will save us and take us to the other shore," she cried.

We did this. As the horsemen came closer, the tree began to straighten up. So great was our happiness that we might have let go of the tree!

I can still see before me the startled horsemen whose eyes got riveted on us. Not for nothing did our ancestors – generation after generation – went round and round the peepal tree.

As soon as our feet touched the other bank, it began to pour, like we had never seen earlier. Not only the men on the shore opposite, we couldn't even see one another. The rain, that day....'said Mangatayaru and her eyes began to pour. 'Bhagawane, Emperumane!' she said, remembering Him. An emotion-gripped Pootti raised her arms above, and sang out to the divine, enthralled.

This was the cue that the session was over. They left, one by one.

9

In his later days Akkayya collected the sobriquet 'Divan' from the villagers since he oversaw the affairs of the large Kottaiyar household.

From his youth Akkayya was known for his sense of humour. It was not easy for one to make fun at his expense and get away with it. Of his own he poked fun at no one. But he wouldn't spare anyone who dared attempt this venture.

Once the weavers had brought a head-load of saris to the Kottaiyar house, Akkayya also took a look at the saris with the rest of the household. Some of the colours were truly beautiful. Akkayya was silently appreciating the perfection of the colour and craft.

Sundarappa Nayakkar asked in jest, "Is the colour of this sari likely to run?"

"If it is washed in pond water it won't run", said Akkayya, looking at the latter in his typical style.

No one quite understood what he meant by that. The weavers gave him a puzzled look. 'What's this about pond water?' they wondered.

Akkayya continued, "but if you wash it in river water the dye will run...Since the pond is bordered on the four sides the dye will not run!"

His answer caused much laughter accompanied as it was by a certain style of narrating, with panache.

All that Akkayya owned was a small house. When he was orphaned, Mangatayaru Ammal brought him over to the Kottaiyar house.

For many days Akkayya shed tears for his lost family. Then he withdrew himself into a shell of silence. He would do what he was told to, silently. He would quietly eat what was served before him. At other times his eyes would remain focused on any little thing lying on the floor. Every one was moved by the sight of the brooding boy.

As days passed by, he recovered from this condition. A certain something was apparent in his person. Though his lips never parted in a smile his eyes would twinkle with mischief. He was by nature energetic. None could compete with him in accomplishing a given task. As he became an adult he became known for his insight into things and his smartness. Once Naranappa Nayakkar got ready to step into an empty granary for cleaning up. A whistling sound came out of the store and he paused awhile. There were two cobras that had somehow fallen into the store. They had to be killed, there were no two thoughts about it. But how to? As each one mulled over the problem Akkayya arrived there. He had tied a thick old blanket up to his knees secured tight with a string. In his right hand he held a kuttutaram, a stick with a sharp hook at the tip that was used for piercing and killing snakes. He jumped into the store and killed the snakes. He was a mere fourteen then.

It was routine for him to catch a snake by the tail swing it round and round and batter it against the ground.

The incident created an opportunity for the village to know him and talk about him. He did something similarly report-worthy when he was twenty one. He had gone to the forest to get thorn bush to fence off the field.

He cut off enough bush for one head-load and tied it around a stick. Placing the load on his head he walked holding the stick

either side. He was confronted by two robbers who ordered him to remove his gold ear studs and hand them over.

“Brothers, is that all? I’ll just stand. Each of you come close to my right and left, unscrew them and take them” As they did so he pressed down each of the two men under either shoulder and reached the village, with an intact head-load!

The village was overwhelmed by this display of strength. The village youngsters hung the robbers upside down from a fig tree near the village pond and lashed them good and proper with dry tamarind stems. A good crowd gathered from the near-by villages also to witness the punishment. After two days their ties were removed and they were told to run off with their lives. They were warned to never again step in the direction of their village.

Govindappa Nayakkar often remarked that Akkayya’s strength derived from his celibacy. He would say this with added emphasis whenever his youngest brother was present within hearing distance!

Both men and women made fun of Akkayya’s celibate status. Men did so discretely, never directly. But not the women. And he forgave them whatever they might say.

10

One day Krishnappa Nayakkar was not feeling well. So Sundarappa Nayakkar substituted for him to hold the plough. They were to do the preliminary tilling after the first rains. Summer harvest was over. The first round of ploughing prepared the fields for a second round, after which seeds were sown. It ensured that the ground was properly drenched when the rains came again. It also ensured that the weeds that sprouted after the first rain were removed.

They normally used a single ploughshare for the first-time ploughing. Even when they rushed with the work the second rain would invariably arrive before it was completed. Akkayya wondered if he could attach two shares to one pair of bullocks. But that was bound to be hard on the beasts. He hit upon a new idea.

He called the loom-maker and made him remove the heavy wooden attachment from the ploughshare and tie an attachment of lighter teak wood. He picked up the old worn-out shares and sharpened their edges. Sundarappa Nayakkar was doubtful if these ‘toys’ would work at all. A small crowd collected there to watch the fun. Krishnappa kept quiet. Watching the work Govindappa Nayakkar said in a soft voice, “When he does something it is always after much thought.” But his brothers doubted his prowess this time. The women enjoyed the banter that went on and smiled a lot.

The next day Akkayya got up at the crack of dawn and woke up Sundarappa Nayakkar also. They went to the nearest field to try out the new ploughshares. They tied the ploughshares, touched the handle of the plough, prayed and began the tilling. The beasts did not find it difficult to pull the two shares for they offered no resistance at all. They stopped ploughing and thought over the problem. Sundarappa Nayakkar suggested that they tie one share forward and the other behind it. But the shares created a problem while turning. They stopped again and thought. Sundarappa Nayakkar smiled and recalled a Telugu folktale and said, "The thought was fine but..." He told Akkayya "Surely our elders would have thought long and hard about things like ploughshares..."*

The latter did not seem to have heard him at all. Suddenly his face lit up. He snapped his fingers. He tied the right ploughshare to the front and the left one behind. A small adjustment and he had achieved it! The bullocks moved swiftly, and there were no hitches. At each turn the ploughshares moved smoothly, not touching and hindering the other. They pressed the ploughshares deep. The soil swelled like a blooming flower. Earth mother was happily responding to the tilling carried on by those men.

This invention of Akkayya's, the twin ploughshare, made for much change in the black soil region. The system was not however suitable for the summer sowing when the ground had to be tilled deep. And the beasts could comfortably pull only one ploughshare.

Sundarappa Nayakkar and Akkayya then went to till a distant field with the double ploughshares. Akkayya sported his usual

* This was the tale where a 'bright' man parked his cart just where a palm tree was being cut so that he did not have to do the additional labour of hoisting the timber on to the cart. But he did not anticipate that the force of the falling trunk that broke the cart to smithereens. Saving his own skin he blamed a weak axle for the loss. (As told by the author to the translator.)

innocent expression on his face and walked behind the bullocks, chatting with Sundarappa Nayakkar. A pot of gruel was being carried by Akkayya on his head. It contained twelve millet balls, each the size of a coconut, immersed in whey. The pot was covered by a coconut shell, that contained dried vegetable fritters, salted lime and hot pickle. Sundarappa carried a pot of water.

Sundarappa Nayakkar had reason to be angry with Akkayya that day. The previous night they were sitting under a moon-lit sky for their post-dinner betel session. Akkayya made special entreaties to Sundarappa Nayakkar that they should do this ritual together – his very tone intending that something was under way, though one could never be quite sure.

As soon as Sundarappa Nayakkar came and sat next to him he extended his palm holding two nuts. The former ensured that they were actually betel nuts before popping them into his mouth.

Akkayya had placed a leaf on his lap with an amount of white lime. "This is new lime. Be careful how much you rub on the betel leaf. Or you will end up with a scalded tongue." He then mimicked such a victim, his tongue hanging out, making them laugh.

Sundarappa Nayakkar did not like the betel leaf as it was too 'hot'. He spat it out in one corner of the front yard. "What have you done this time?" asked Chellapillai Kannappa and came to Akkayya. Akkayya pointed his finger at the blob of lime. Kannappa was still confused. As though to make a point Akkayya rubbed lime on a leaf and put it into his mouth.

A little later Kannappa laughed loudly. Every one ran towards Akkayya who held the leaf aloft for every one to see. The leaf had a round hole in it.

Akkayya now let out the trick. He placed the leaf on his lap and pulled out a 'pinch' of his white *veshti* through the hole. It looked like white lime. A drop of water to wet the fingertip and the trick was ready, he explained!

Govindappa Nayakkar was truly impressed by Akkayya's sense of fun. He wondered where he got his ideas from.

11

Akkayya aimed his devices at his victims only once. He had enough in his armoury to display a new trick each time.

Sundarappa Nayakkar plodded on thinking of the night's event. He felt that he ought to square matters between them.

The tilling over Sundarappa Nayakkar felt an urgent need to empty his bladder. He stepped into the stream and carried on with the job. He also shouted to Akkayya not to throw away the water remaining in the pot.

He then asked him for water. Will you pour the water yourself or shall I, offered Akkayya.

Sundarappa Nayakkar was happy to hear this for it created the possibility of making a sarcastic reference to Akkayya as a lowly person who poured water to wash his feet.

Akkayya would have poured just one coconut shell of water as Sundarappa Nayakkar bent down and rubbed his feet. At that point Akkayya poured the entire pot of water on the ground and ran!

"I have to rub these feet on you, I will !" shouted Sundarappa Nayakkar and ran after him creating a scene.

Akkayya stopped in front of Govindappa Nayakkar, after that long run, quite breathless.

In a while Sundarappa Nayakkar also arrived, holding his left arm aloft. His eyes pleaded with Akkayya not to let out any-

thing.

“What happened? Where are the bullocks?” he asked Akkayya, as he rubbed lime on a betel leaf. The younger brother disappeared in a trice, before his brother could even turn his head towards him.

Akkayya related everything in his usual sedate style. The older brother laughed heartily. The Urkudumban turned his face the other way, trying to hide his laughter!

Once Govindappa Nayakkar's father sent Akkayya to his paternal aunt's village with kammam grass seedlings. One had to travel a whole day to reach there. In those days people calculated and described distances by the time it took to reach one's destination. A place could be an hour's or two hours' distance, in their parlance.

The sun had not set when Akkayya reached that village, and asked for the house of 'Gopalla Venkatamma'.

It is rather interesting that in villages no one is known by the name given by parents. What worked was the name assigned by the village. It could range from the work that he or she did, a fun name, the person's quality, an illness, a house name and so on.

When Gopalla Venkatamma was married into that village, it had more than its fair share of Venkatammas. Venkatamma had a milk and rose complexion. She became 'Tundabandu' Venkatammal. 'Tundabandu' in Telugu meant the red kovai fruit.

At the outset the villagers could not understand who Akkayya was referring to. After the discovery of the 'right' Venkatamma they directed him to her house.

The latter did not speak to Akkayya at all.

kkayya stood there with his head-load observing her with ex-

pressionless eyes. Venkatammal's husband who happened to arrive there at that moment helped him put down the seedlings and enquired after everyone back home. After giving proper replies Akkayya resumed his usual 'neutral' deportment.

Tundabandu Venkatamma was vain about her good looks. She had been born in a large well-to-do family and had been married into a similar one. And she had some special qualities. The person she would deign to speak to had to be of fair skin. If the person wore sufficient jewelry, so much the better. And she would be whole-heartedly friendly if the person was from a rich family as well. In the absence of these indicators she would observe silence.

When Akkayya returned home, everyone asked him about Venkatamma's family.

“Well they are all fine... except Venkatamma...her condition is...” Akkayya's voice trailed off. “Well... how can I...my body is breaking into goose pimples....” he stopped, cleared a choking throat and swallowed hard. With evident sorrow he said, “Venkatamma can hardly see...with kundam in both eyes...it is really sad.” He sat down on the floor, the picture of a broken man, resting his head in his palm.

The women began to weep and said harsh words for Venkatamma's husband for not being bothered enough to inform them.

Mangatayaru Ammal sent for Akkayya and questioned him again and again. “She is delicate, like royalty”, she commiserated. “I often think of her. Such wonderful eyes she has and the jealous ones mustn't cast their evil eye on her, I used to tell myself. And that very thing happened. Oh! God of the Seven Hills!”

The news spread far and wide. Many arrived there to make enquiries.

Mangatayaru Ammal called Dasappa Nayakkar and told him to go to Venkatamma's house and bring her over if necessary. She told Govindappa Nayakkar to make arrangements for the journey.

Kundam was a truly terrible eye disease. It caused blindness and looked horrifying, with a protruding, fleshy growth, two inches long. Seldom would it affect both eyes. Children would scream in fright if they happened to see an afflicted person.

Venkatamma had large, beautiful eyes that looked attractive even when they were closed. The eyelashes were long and thick. The eyes seem to have a natural line of kohl on them. The eyebrows were twin crowns topping the eyes. The upper eyelids had a curving line-fold that could claim one's attention for a whole day.

Dasappa Nayakkar and the rest returned as quickly as they had departed. They did not bring back Venkatamma with them. Their faces were wreathed in smiles and all queries were repaid with smile and laughter.

Presently Akkayya stood before Mangatayaru Ammal with his familiar simpering expression of complete innocence. The former was hard put to control her laughter, at that look of Akkayya's! "I know that you are not a wicked person... and she deserved it....Yes...You may go."

The women looked at him now with a different feeling... that they should be careful about him.

Villagers acquainted with Venkatamma's vanity liked what Akkayya did. It was absolutely right, they said.

12

One day Govindappa Nayakkar asked Pootti: "And how did you escape from the Muslim king?"

Mangatayaru Ammal picked up the narrative from where she had left off.

'In that streaming rain Grandmother repeated the Lord's name loudly. We echoed her call.' "Govinda! Govinda!" we shouted and walked southward.

We were drenched through and through. That was so wonderful. The rain went on without stop. We filled our palms with rain water and drank it.

When we had walked for some time we felt that we were approaching a village. We keened an umbrella-wielding figure under a *vagai* tree. As we went closer, we saw a short fair man with an umbrella made of screw pine. A red vaishnavite tilak glowed on his forehead. His nose was flat and his neck was thickset. "Ranti, Ranti!" he said welcoming us. 'Goyindappa, what he said deepened our surprise and fervour.'

"In my dream last night I saw you escape. I am waiting for you since morning. Quick! Come fast" he said. He gave a change of clothes to the whole lot of sixty seven persons. He gave us warm water for a bath, tasty food to fill our bellies. For a number of days we slept in his empty granary. "You need fear no one here" he said.

Still, there is a limit to the period one could stay as one's guest. We could not return to our village. The thought of the Muslim king left us cold with fear. We decided that we would move far, very far, to an unknown place in the south.

We bemoaned our fate, a fate that had appeared to light up the road to royal fortune but had actually rendered us impoverished refugees. We were afraid even to think what awaited us in future. That Govayya gave us a touching send-off. The generous soul that he was, he gave us arms for self-protection, vessels, food grain, clothing, blankets...Can anyone forget his generosity, Govindappa? I named my first son - your grandfather - after him...how else could we repay his kindness?

Govayya sent his men in all the four directions to find out if anyone was on our trail. He allowed us to step out of his home only after he was fully satisfied.

During the day we were not afraid. But the night took a toll on us. We were mortally afraid of robbers and dacoits.

We longed for our village, our friends and the lands we had to leave behind. We talked all the time about our cattle and goat that had ceased to be ours.

Every now and then Periyappa would grieve before grandmother. "Mother, what harm did we cause to a fellow being that we face such sorrow."

It was evening. We could walk on further. It was a wooded area. A small temple gopuram was visible at a far distance. We decided to walk towards it making it our destination for the day. The temple was dedicated to the Goddess and was fairly large. We concluded that we were fated to spend the night in the temple.

We washed our face and limbs in the cool waters of a nearby spring. We were most reluctant to leave the water - so cool,

so delightfully cool. We wanted to sink our bodies and lie there under that coverlet of coolness.

The yellow evening light was so bracing for the body. At that moment we could hear someone singing. One could call it divine music as though the forest nymph herself was singing. A little later a short lady appeared from the temple precincts. She was petite and beautiful like a temple statue. She wore big round ear-studs and a *toratti* in her nostril. Her thick hair had been tamed into a smooth bun. Large coral beads adorned her neck. Under her left forearm she held a longish covered box made of palm-leaf strip. In her right hand she held a bamboo stick.

She came towards us with a smile on her face. She stood on the edge and watched us wade in water, humming to herself all the while.

After looking at us for sometime she asked us "My children, where are you coming from?"

Her sweet talk was like a parrot chirping in Telugu. We told her what we had been telling our previous enquirers - that we were pilgrims visiting holy sites. She laughed sweetly as she heard this. We requested her to eat with us. You eat, she said. If your bellies are full so will be mine, she said, lovingly.

So we sat in the spacious precincts of the temple. It was twilight. She too sat down with us. Suddenly we saw a lot of armed horsemen galloping towards us. Seeing our distress she spoke in an assuring tone, "My children, do not feel afraid. I am here for you. Be calm, be yourselves." We were consoled by her words. But we were dumbstruck that we were so defenseless.

The men dismounted and quickly entered the temple. They moved forward carefully, watching all around. But they didn't seem to see us at all! It was as though we were not visible to them!

The men checked everywhere and their leader asked the woman "Great lady! Did a group of sixty along with a beautiful girl come here?"

"No, my son! No one came here. I have been here all the while." Her voice was truly impressive.

The men believed her. They mounted their horses and turned away, faster than before. As soon as they left she rolled her eyes and laughed silently. "They are mad, those men!" she said and stopped laughing.

We got ready to spend the night in the temple. Suddenly Periyappa asked grandmother, "Mother, do you think it is wise of us to stay here?"

Grandmother replied "Son, wherever we go our shadows will trail us." She raised her arms, saluting, in front of the sanctum sanctorum. "We are now at Her refuge" she said, her throat constricting with emotion. At that moment the lady who had saved us came towards grandmother. Quietly she extended her cane box and bamboo stick before her. After giving them, she quickly walked back to the temple. Grandmother and I followed her, curious as to where she might be going. But we couldn't find her anywhere.

Grandmother could no more hold herself. She was overwhelmed by emotion like never before! A loud scream, so unlike her, emerged from her throat. "Mother, Mother", she sobbed. She placed the box and the stick on the stone seat in the inner sanctum and fell on the floor. She then fainted.

When we realized that she had fainted we splashed cold water on her face. It took her a while to come back to her senses.

She hugged Chenna Devi and shed tears of joy. "I can now die in peace. You will never be in want. I have seen with my own eyes three divine occurrences. Now the Goddess, Devi, has

revealed herself to me.... My good fortune..." Grandmother wept and so did we. We prostrated before the box and the stick and prayed to the Almighty.

Early next morning we bathed and circumambulated the temple in wet clothes. We had to decide whether we should stay on or move from there. We sought divine guidance in the matter and cast flowers for that purpose. The flower that was picked up after due prayers held the message that we should move on...

Grandmother gave the stick and the box to Periyappa. She then took a fistful of soil and put it in a yellow cloth. We all prostrated before the sanctum and began our onward journey.'

13

‘As we went on we had several people asking us the usual why’s and wherefore’s. We gave them answers that seemed most appropriate. We often told them that we were on our way to a particular centre. Once we joined a pilgrims group, along the way. Our ears and hearts felt full as they sang out the Divya Nama Sankirtanam – the glorious names of the Lord. We too joined them.

After visiting a number of holy centres and bathing in their pure waters we climbed the Seven Hills. We had a *darsan* of Lord Srinivasa and wept our hearts out before Him. Our minds were set at rest and we spent a few days there.

We then proceeded southward. As we moved deeper and deeper into the south we shed our fears completely.

Our feet developed cracks and sores, with our incessant walking. Two children and three old people fell prey to disease and died during this long journey. Disease and the sorrow of the loss of dear ones upset us.

Hunger pangs, enforced fasts, delayed meals, tired body, depressed mind, pervasive bitterness, sullen silence, finding fault in another – these too dogged us.

One family fought with us and parted, midway. We were not able to console them despite all our effort.

During the journey we saw wonderful trees and creepers, the likes of which we had not seen before. And such flowers – such

colour and shape and with fantastic smell! Even looks of people changed, from one soil to another.

The cows that we saw here looked different. The language was new. They were a strange lot. And a loving lot. From now, this ‘Arava Desam’ – the Tamil land — was to be our final refuge.

When we walked, we reached a village hospice. However there was no place available in the hospice. Adjacent was a grove with thick tall trees. We camped there for a few days.

When we reached there, we found a similar group like ours leaving the spot. They too carried a palm strip box on a yellow cloth and a cane stick. Periyamma asked her what it was.

That lady would have been as old as Periyamma. Her hair was white as lime. She was a *sumangali*. Her face was stained by turmeric and a big vermilion dot decorated her forehead. But for some reason her face conveyed a deep sorrow.

Before she answered our question she kept staring at us for a while. Her look conveyed a range of unspoken enquiries – Who are you? Are you trustworthy? Why do you make me recall all that? How can I narrate it? – and so on. Yet – it had to be told. Only by sharing could one lessen one’s sorrow. And there had to be an end to entertaining suspicions regarding whosoever one met.

“Govindappa! That too was a tale with a Muslim king in it. Her daughter’s name was Tulasi. Even at birth she had thick curly hair. The child too was very fond of her hair.

“It looked lovely if it was left to cascade. It looked beautiful if it was tied up...

When she stood up her hair fell to the ground. We would trim it up to her heel, against her wishes.

Her bath was an event that involved the efforts of the entire

family. She would sit on a cot with a frame that was higher and longer and woven with rope with large gaps. The hair would billow on the entire length of the cot. Coconut oil would be rubbed on it. Shikakai nuts would be boiled in water and the water strained. This would be rubbed on her hair. Warm water would be poured in plenty to remove this. Then her hair would be patted gently of excess water and she would sit on a similar cot to make her hair dry faster. Braziers of fragrant agar smoke would be kept ready to make it dry quickly. Combing them free of tangles was another huge task.

When she was a young lady her hair was fifteen feet long. Her father was thinking of making a chair with steps for his daughter. Her hair was a source of wonder for the entire region and many came to see her beautiful face and hair.

‘One day, like any other day, she was sitting on the cot and combing out the tangles. Suddenly the street dogs began to bark. From the backyard garden seven or eight men riding tall horses came up to very spot, where she had bathed. When we realized that they were Turks we ran away from our home. Tulasi could not run. As she tried to dodge them her hair proved to be an obstruction – her feet got stuck and she fell down. When we went back to save her...’

The lady found it difficult to continue. Her lips twitched and her eyes welled up.

‘Then...she...my daughter Tulasi proclaimed the names of the goddesses of chastity. We too repeated the same in loud voices. My ladies, it was then that the miracle happened in the blink of an eye.

‘That sinner lifted Tulasi’s hair as she fell down. Immediately the earth split open, took her in and closed within a trice.

The Turks were shocked. The man who had held her hair let go, in fright. They mounted their horses and sped away. All that

was visible was a crack. We put our ears to the ground. Again and again we cried out her name.

Wiping her eyes, she said ‘Mother Earth had taken her back to where she came from. She had attained divinity.

‘This box contains the discarded hair and a fistful of mud from that spot.

‘We never keep it on the floor and carry it by turn. In the place we settle permanently we shall erect a temple for her, resting the box in the sanctum sanctorum.’ She wiped her tears with the sari-end and walked away.

‘Govindappa, just like the Pottiyamman Temple that we have here, with the box and the stick in the sanctum sanctorum, there is a similar temple five leagues away, with the box containing her hair. They pray there even today.’

The entire family – men, women, children – heard these stories with utter sincerity, with the sole exception of Akkayya. The latter thought they were embellished exaggerations, at best.

14

When Urkudumban told Govindappa Nayakkar that the dacoits were going to enter their village, Akkayya happened to arrive there.

“The torch-wielding dacoits are coming here? Let them. We can organize a reception for them”, said Akkayya. The other two could not resist sustaining the jolly mood that had set in.

“You mean you want to serve them post-dinner snacks?” asked Govindappa Nayakkar jokingly.

The torch-wielding dacoits performed their ‘profession’ with much planning and technique. They would ensure that rumours were launched of their ‘imminent’ arrival in advance. For a number of nights the villagers would remain awake. Their determination would flag and their vigil would become less sharp. Once they lowered guard and allowed themselves a cosy sleep the dacoits would descend on them with suddenness and launch their attack. They would put to torch the fodder piles at one end of the village. When the villagers got busy dousing the fire the dacoits would attack the houses at the farthest end of the village.

The dacoits came not in bands of ten or twenty men. They would number a hundred or even two hundred. Each one held a burning torch in one hand and a weapon in the other, which could be a scythe, a sharp-tipped stake, a sword or axe.

Two or three men would stand outside the entrance of each house, to prevent the men from coming out. They would attack one or two chosen houses, get in and loot.

If the owner of the house happened to have hidden valuables in buried containers, as he often did, they would scald his face and get the secret out.

These men preferred to launch their attacks in the winter months.

They would torch the entrance and simultaneously break the three enclosing walls of the house. If the house was locked they would make big holes in the three walls and the entire horde would enter.

The village and the Kottaiyar household readied themselves for the attack. They piled up cartloads of stones on the upper storey at suitable places from where they could be hurled at the attackers by hand or launched with a catapult. Yes, the first and foremost weapon of defense was the good old stone.

While the youngsters picked up rounded stones Akkayya went for flat ones. When a flat stone was flung, swirling, it created a frightful noise. Chosen youngsters were deployed in the upper storeys of a number of houses, with stones and weapons. Soon after the sun set, they had an early dinner, ensured that their important possessions were safe and began to turn off the lights.

The women and children of the Kottaiyar house were told to confine themselves to a large room with an iron door on the first storey and to lock themselves in.

Tiruvatti, Govindappa Nayakkar’s ten-year old son ran to Akkayya, and told him in a conspiratorial manner. “Uncle, I hear that the robbers are going to visit our house. I want to see them. Will you wake me up when they come?” Akkayya opened his eyes wide conveying his surprise. He then nodded in agreement and placed a stone in his palm and said, “You keep this under your pillow, in any case.” The women controlled their laughter with difficulty.

Krishnappa Nayakkar and Akkayya stayed on the first floor. As ordered by Govindappa Nayakkar the main door was left open. In the large and level front yard Akkayya had strewn four potfuls of millets.

The night grew deeper and deeper. Men had been posted at particular spots and told to sleep, till alerted for action. But sleep naturally eluded one, the occasion being too tense.

Krishnappa Nayakkar told Akkayya to tell him a story so that they could stay awake.

"Mmm... so he wants a story" he muttered to himself and began to put one together in his head even as he wondered about the safety of the young men hiding in the trees near the tank. Well, he shouldn't worry, he assured himself, since Raghupati, that smart young man, was there.

In rural areas when one is told to tell a story it was customary to pose a counter question – should one tell the story of his birth or of his growth. The listener had to choose one. The story of course would connect with neither. No one knows as to why this 'essential' question was posed by a narrator.

But Akkayya launched into the story right away, without preamble.

Once upon a time there was this king in a certain kingdom. He had a son of marriageable age. They arranged his marriage with two sisters who were princesses. The marriage celebration was a glittering event.

It was the first night after the marriage. There were two rooms on the first floor, one above the other with a ladder connecting the two rooms. The younger sister was in the room below and elder one, above. The prince came up to the first storey.

At the same time a thief had planned his heist in the palace. He threw up a rope that was tied to the leg of an iguana and the

animal attached itself to the wall. The thief climbed up and reached that very spot. He waited for the prince to enter one of the rooms so that he could begin his work.

Krishnappa Nayakkar laughed softly as he said this.

The prince was preparing to climb up the ladder. The younger princess, also waiting for him, caught hold of his leg.

"Why do you pass me by? Can't you see that I am here?" she said.

"Very well" he said and began to step down. Now the older princess caught hold of his neck.

"What do you mean by this? You married me first. You will first come to my room and then go there. I am not leaving you, certainly not!"

The prince told the younger sister who was clutching his feet that her sister's case was just. He told her to let go of his feet.

"It is the older one who should have patience. I have openly voiced my wishes. Why not she be generous, for a change. She has always been this way" complained the younger one.

"This too, now, this tongue wagging, after throwing all norms to the wind! No, never! It is me who he will visit," said the adamant sister. Her grip around his neck became tighter.

The younger one would not let go of his feet. She pulled him downward. Thus did the siblings trouble the prince with a 'do or die' effort.

The robber too was watching the show, quite engrossed. He waited, curious about the 'end'.

The prince tried hard to placate the two sisters and failed. He was clueless as to what he could do to solve the problem.

"I wish to go to neither, leave me", he shouted angrily, struggling. His waist cloth got undone. Now they got an even better

handle. (Kumarappa Nayakkar had to try really hard to suppress his laughter this time)

What could the poor robber do? He certainly couldn't take a lighted candle to that spot.

The two women simply would not concede. The prince's eyes began to bulge out of their sockets.

At last the night gave way to dawn. The second horn sounded from the palace.

The robber was now scared. The day was fast arriving making his job impossible. As he tried to leave stealthily, the guards caught hold of him.

They took him before the king. "Cut off his head!" the latter ordered.

There was some noise above the house and Akkayya got up to see. He came back satisfied. There was nothing amiss. "It was just one of those things, a sort of suspicion" he said and continued. "The prince came to know about the robber and the king's order. He ran to the king and told him not to have him beheaded for he could suggest a better punishment.

And what was that, asked the king.

"Just get him married to two women at the same time, that will do!" said the prince.

Even as he was concluding muted noises could again be heard from above. Akkayya alerted every one on the ground and the sides and climbed up. In the western side two fiery lights could be seen, moving now and then.

"Could these be fire-breathing ghouls?" wondered a youngster.

"There isn't such a thing as ghouls" said Akkayya. "Ghouls are creatures of the mind."

"Is it new moon tonight?" asked someone. "New moon was yesterday. Traditionally robbers don't go out for a kill on new moon. It is a day when they rest their limbs", said Akkayya.

The torch-wielding dacoits were not coming from the west, as they had thought. They were coming from the east.

15

There were roughly 60 to 70 men in that band. Their footwear had leather thongs. Two or three of them carried skin-bags filled with water or toddy. Almost all had a half or a three-quarter torch. Five or six men held brass pots with oil on one hand. On the other hand on the wrist they had tied a cloth band. This was to prevent oil from seeping down their arms as they poured oil for the torches.

When they were in the outskirts of the village one of them took out a piece of cotton that had been wrapped in a dry plantain sheath and rubbed flint stones.

One spark fell on the cotton. Instantly one of them put the glowing cotton on a torch and blew on it. A flame erupted and the torch began to burn.

Within no time at all they lit their torches, from one to another. Now the oil bearers quickly poured oil into the torches. The torch-wielder turned it and poked it for the oil to go deeper. On each torch, about six inches down the burning surface a piece of cloth had been tied. This was meant to soak the hot oil that might flow down the brim, so that the hand was not scalded.

When they entered a village they would fold their hands in prayer when they saw a temple!

After all the villagers were not going to part with their possessions easily. In that battle there would be loss of life, on both sides. Nothing was sure about their lives till they stepped

back into their homesteads. They told their women, it was said, to remove their taali - the wedding string worn around their necks - and keep it in the uri, the rope shelf hung from the ceiling to store milk and such other stuff away from prying paws.

For days together they would carry out a thorough reconnaissance of the streets and the houses and anything else of consequence by posing as beggars.

The band quickly entered the street leading to the Kottaiyar house and stopped. The dogs attacked them, barking. But they were staved off with burning torches.

As the dogs barked in a frenzy the village assumed a state of high alert.

Akkayya had not fenced off young men into their homes. Instead he had made them hide themselves in the tall trees near the tank. They were well-trained and armed.

As soon as the robber band entered the village they quickly climbed down and were ready with their arms and stones. They waited for a certain sound, a cue.

The entrance was wide open, which surprised the men and made them somewhat apprehensive. They lifted their torches and took a good look and nothing seemed untoward. One of them, apparently their leader, gave the go-ahead, with a slight nod. A group of nine men entered the front yard.

All the nine skidded and fell. They were the least ready for this! And the whole house resounded with laughter. They were not prepared for this either! As they fell they spread their arms wide in a desperate effort at balancing their body weight. They tried equally fast to get up and understand what had happened to them braving the burns that had been caused by their torches when they fell down - and they fell down just as fast. Their prized leather footwear helped not to run but fall.

More members of the band, with the sort of quick thinking that occurs in the face of disaster crawled in quickly and lay on

their bellies. This could enable the rest to walk on the 'human mat' that covered a millet 'ditch'.

Akkayya was unnerved as he saw this. This was the first time that a ploy of his was defeated.

He chastised himself for not paying heed to Kudumban's advice that the men should be attacked with stones as soon as they arrived at the entrance. He ought to have been mad not to have accepted that suggestion.

As the robbers marched on the human mat with their torches a strange sound emerged from Akkayya's throat.

The youngsters now came out running. Urkudumban's catapult came into play. Stones began to fly from the hands of Akkayya and Krishnappa Nayakkar.

The place reverberated with a melee of sounds. Stones rose up, hitting the bodies with a strange sound. Wails of pain rent the air, along with sounds of rage and shouts for revenge. As the stones fell like hail the human 'mat' gave way and they fell on the strewn millet unable to move backward or forward. Each stone from Kudumban's catapult floored a man and left him writhing in unbearable pain.

The extensive and comprehensive attack from every side of the house and the upper storey made it a struggle for them to try a different tactic. To make it worse, Akkayya's youth battalion joined the fray. They could do nothing but turn back carrying their wounded and stricken companions.

For a moment it felt as though a huge downpour had ended.

In that midnight hour the entire village danced with joy to the drumbeats of victory. Lamps began to brighten up homes. Some ran towards the temple, beat the big drum, sounded the bells and blew the conch. The sounds of their merrymaking could be heard far away in that cool hour.

The millet grains were scraped out of the earth. Akkayya

picked up a long torch left behind by the band and laughed. Never before had the village heard such a sound from him.

The torch was displayed for a long time in the frontage of the Kottaiyar house, hung from the ceiling in an iron ring. It became a useful object for their descendants when they sought to assert their proud origins.

Even today in the terrace of the Kottaiyar house and every old pucca house in the village stones as big as coconuts can be seen.

The village was agog with the same talk, as night gave way to day. A little before dawn the village goatherd headed for the Kottaiyar house to see Ramappa Nayakkar. He told him that the robbers had taken away four healthy goats. This untoward news made the Kottaiyar crowd laugh.

"How can they go empty-handed?" asked Akkayya.

Govindappa Nayakkar said that it was alright. "Let it be. They must drink and eat fried meat, for all the pain they are going through!"

Ramappa Nayakkar who was in-charge of the village livestock heard the two but did not say anything. Krishnappa Nayakkar then said, "Brother, forget it. If they don't accept it as a common loss, we will replace it". He looked at his elder brother and the latter nodded in agreement.

"If we had gifted a few of their men to mother earth they wouldn't have had the temerity to do this" fumed an angry Ramappa Nayakkar.

None responded to this thought. Urkudumban looked at Akkayya who in turn looked at Krishnappa Nayakkar. The latter seldom looked straight in the face of Govindappa Nayakkar. The latter who was quietly observing the whole lot revealed a smile, rather a semblance of a smile, like the slit in a grain of paddy and nodded his head slightly.

16

Rubbing lime on a betel leaf Govindappa Nayakkar looked up at the torch. Many thoughts traversed his mind. He got up and went to the rear. His throat felt a bit dry. It was the tobacco, he told himself.

Rinsing his mouth he splashed cold water from the mud pot on his face and limbs. Drying his face with the upper cloth he entered the kitchen through the side entrance. On the raised platform adjoining the kitchen wall lay a few half-finished palmyra leaf fans, along with the necessary tools. Kannappa was mostly found in this part of the house. Now he was away with Urkudumban, Akkayya and others to bring the murderer to the village assembly.

As he stepped inside the kitchen calling for his daughter Seetamma, the women, who were also busy talking about the murder dispersed from the kitchen to the adjoining room as a mark of respect to the eldest Nayakkar scion.

Seetamma offered him a pot of buttermilk. Govindappa Nayakkar drank it, wiped his mouth and let out a small burp. He then walked towards the village tank. The tank was filled to the brim, after the summer rain. The trees cast cool shades. Govindappa Nayakkar sat down beneath the peepul tree, uttering the name of Ram. Each tree had been planted by the ancestors of the villagers. Today each of them resembled a huge giant.

The peepul tree had been planted by Mangatayaramma's

son-in-law Kondayya.

The tree next, a fig tree, had been planted by Nunnakonda Srirangayya, ancestor of Nunnakonda Venkatappayya.

The next one had been planted by Konetti Raghavayya.

The punnarasu tree had been planted by Chakkani Bennagarayya.

All trees had been planted and cared for by their ancestors.

When it was decided that they would settle there they dug the tank also. At that time it was only a trough, surrounded by cactus bushes. They cleared and leveled the place to make it a green grove. Govindappa Nayakkar recalled the tales told by Mangatayaramma, of those old times.

When Mangatayaramma and her ancestors reached the place, they felt it in their bones that this piece of earth was destined for them. The water in the ditch was clear. There was an old neem tree near it. They had all sat down in that shade. A little distance away, to the north, was a tall snake hill with a number of 'eyes'. The women ululated, covered the cane box and placed it near the hill. After ululating three times, they took a pinch of the mud and threw it on top of their heads. They put a wee bit into their mouth and smeared the left-over on their foreheads. At that moment grandmother was possessed by the divine spirit. Periyappa held her, just in time, or she would have fallen on the ground.

Grandmother sobbed and sobbed. Everyone prostrated before and prayed to her to tell them what had overcome her. Presently grandmother started talking in a soft voice stressing each word. "My children, do not grieve recalling that you were born in a far-away land and that you are now condemned to live in another far-away land. Everything belongs to mother earth. From one finger of her hand you have to come to another finger. You need not fear anything. I shall always be with you and safeguard you."

“That’s all we want, Mother”, they said. Grandmother then extended her hand towards the south. This fringe of the forest should be the grazing ground for your future herds.” She then pointed to the east. “Destroy this cactus jungle and make the land your field. Build me a temple at this very spot.” So be it they all said and once again prostrated themselves before her.

Then she fainted again, in Periyappa’s arms. Her head on his lap, she went into a deep slumber.

When she woke up they told her how the divine spirit had descended on her and of divine orders of the goddess that came through her.

Grandmother remembered Chenna Devi and wept quietly. It was such a tragic loss, the way they lost her.

During their journey by foot they lost many children and elderly men and women. But Chenna’s death shattered them.

True, time is the best healer. But even scars bleed when memories poke them.

Chenna found it difficult to walk even when they were a few hours away from Srirangam. Her body was losing water because of infection. They carried her supportively and made her lie down in a corner of a hospice. She developed a high fever at night.

For the past few days she had stopped talking with anyone. She suffered silently. She blamed herself for the harsh times that had befallen her near and dear ones and grew more and more depressed.

Grandmother was restless, with a sense of foreboding gripping her. She was upset by the bad dreams that she had been having, of late. This almost shattered Periyappa who was struggling with his own grief.

From Chenna’s condition it was clear that she was leaving us behind. We were defenseless as the spirit of death hovered above us and we knew not what to do.

“Chenna my dearest, are you bent upon leaving me?” said Chenna’s mother, weeping.

Grandmother then told us that we should not cry at the approach of death.

She had said so earlier too when Guruvayya was dying. His wife was weeping a lot. Said grandmother on that occasion, “When the soul departs, the tears that one sheds swell into a flood in its path and hamper its journey. One may weep after the soul has left the body. Never do so while it is leaving.”

Chenna’s head was on grandmother’s lap. Her lotus feet lay on Periyamma’s.

It was the auspicious time of summer solstice, early in the morning. The sun was yet to rise.

Before one dies one’s face assumes a calm look. This was seen on Chenna’s face also. She opened her eyes and looked at everyone. When she looked at me it seemed to me that they stayed on me a trifle longer. Grandmother recited a prayer for Sriranganathar in a loud voice.

“Help me sit.” This was her last sentence. Grandmother made her sit on her lap and made her lean against her body. We were all looking at Chenna.

Her face exuded an other-worldly happiness. Then her head lolled to one side as it happens to one who falls asleep, sitting.

Govindappa! How can I describe it? Death induces a pall on the best of human countenances. But Chenna looked beautiful even at that hour.

We were stunned into silence, incapacitated of thought, action, hunger.

Pilgrims were proceeding in groups towards the Srirangam temple. It was festival time.

We too got up and walked.

We wet our bodies in the Kaveri. We saw Lord Sriranganathar. Having measured out his dole for the entire world he had gone off to sleep with the wooden measure as his headrest.

A huge white parakeet kept uttering the name of Ranga, all the time, with its fruit-red beak, in that big temple.

17

They ate whatever edible fruit and berry they could find in that forest.

The weapons they had carried to protect themselves from robbers and other such tormentors became useful in clearing the forest and felling trees.

Before the rains arrived they erected small mud huts. The first thing they constructed was the Amman temple. They made a roof by tying the branches of the *neem*, *puvarasu* and *manjanatti* with palm fibre. They cut tall grass and dried it. They wove grass in this frame and thus made the roof.

They struggled against a large widespread cactus forest. Huge mounts of cacti 'guarded' the ground they had cleared. But they did not dry up and began to sprout again. It seemed to be an impossible task to create a few usable patches. Their enthusiasm began to wane. The cactus had to be rooted out totally. Huge stones had to be displaced in the process and hollowed spots filled up, to level the ground. When they dug into the earth they found strange tubers and roots. They did not know if they were edible or not. In some places they found ripe *korai* bulbs redolent with the smell of earth. There was a variety of wild spinach. And any number of birds' eggs that they fried and ate.

They preserved the precious food grains that they had carried with them, over the immense distance they had travelled, with hope in their hearts. They ate whatever the forest offered them.

A few peeled aloe, washed it well to rid it of its bitter and ate it. "This is a divine food that can cure any stomach ailment" said grandmother.

The water was like nectar. With a trace of soil in it, it could quench the need for a second meal and filled them with them energy.

They hunted birds and animals. There were countless beehives in the midst of bushes. They collected pots of honey. They roasted the flesh of animals, dipped it in honey and ate it.

Sometimes there was an excess of meat. It was cut into small pieces, salted, sun-dried, and stored away for use in the rainy season.

At last they came to the conclusion that the forest had to be burnt and for good reason.

The rains were fast-approaching. The forest was not yielding to their labour, which was becoming too strenuous. For how many days was one to battle with cacti with bare hands!

But a few were totally against the idea and they had their reasons.

It was possible to burn a forest but could they create one if needed?

If the rains were late they could at least depend on the forest for food. What would their plight be if they destroyed that source?

The wind has to blow in a suitable direction or the fire will surround us also felt some and they would be doomed.

The more they thought the more they were overwhelmed by the possible consequences.

Grandmother used her forefinger and drew a map on the earth. She explained that the land they needed could be

separated from the rest of the forest by creating a broad empty area. She drew a square, six inches by six and drew an outer square. If the in-between area was cleared and the fire started in the inner square it would be confined to that area, wouldn't it, she asked.

The elderly Nallayya laughed and said "Aunt, the forest that we remove and place on the sides will dry up and actually catch fire faster. What of that?"

"Whatever we chop off we should throw into the inner square and not on the path." said grandmother. Most of them felt that her idea was worth pursuing.

Except for a couple of men who stood guard through the night, the whole lot talked of the new idea till they fell asleep.

The children were put to sleep soon after their evening meal which they ate immediately after sunset. Their afternoons were entirely spent chasing the myriad insects they found in the forest. The older children went to help the men in their task of clearing the jungle. Some of them would stand guard against predatory creatures as infants slept in hammocks hung from tree branches.

The night guards were now awake. Whenever the flame in the fire pit became low they would insert dry pieces of wood and ensure that the fire was not extinguished.

The god of fire gave them light in that darkness when they had no lamps. It gave them protection against the cold and warded off beasts.

18

They woke up along with the birds in the forest and were as happy and busy. As decided on the previous day they got down to the task of making a 'forest island'. Except the very young, the old and the ailing they all devoted themselves, men and women, to that tough task.

Hissing snakes, scorpions, centipedes and such poisonous creatures confronted them. Strange beetles stung them, making their skin erupt into bloody rashes.

There were any number of iguana. It was quite easy to catch them. At the sight of man these creatures would enter their hollows and hide their bodies but would reveal a wee bit of the face. One had to insert a stick into the hole. The iguana would bite it and hold on to it. It apparently thought that it had caught the enemy! The iguana would come with the stick when it was pulled out.

When they killed a *cheda*, a large centipede, they severed its head, buried it and marked the spot. After a few days they dug up the spot and picked up tiny yellow and black rings, the flesh bleached away by the soil. These were strung in a black thread and worn around the hip by little kids.

They killed the rat snake, removed the fat. It was boiled and preserved for medicinal use.

They cooked the flesh of hedgehogs with salt and fed it to children. The spiny skin was dried in the sun and stored as

medicine for whooping cough. These creatures were easy to catch since they were somewhat slow. One merely threw some mud at them and they rolled themselves into balls, that were picked up easily.

When they killed rabbits, the women would let the blood soak into an old cloth. They believed that rubbing this on the scalp caused the hair to grow long and luxuriant.

They collected wild castor seeds, powdered them on rock surfaces and boiled the powder in water. They collected the film of precious oil that collected on the top with the help of a feather. When the collectible was full the oil was heated again, till it was free of water. This was strained through cloth and kept in clean containers. Thus they got their medicinal oils.

It was certainly not the case that this hunter-gatherer existence was a happy time for all of them. Many longed for the earth they had left behind. The long passage had made them forget their old hearth only temporarily. When they realized that this was to be their home, for now and forever, the old memories shook them.

This was especially true of the elderly Pothanna, who would not only shed tears but also sob like a child.

He would look at the sky, into a far distance, as though a star was visible especially for him. When it was night the star came down, it seemed. Pothanna would be gazing on the ground, head bent forever.

Grandmother would make it a point to ask whenever her sleep was interrupted "Pothanna, aren't you sleeping?"

"Sleep...all of you may sleep..." he would say and sigh. He would say nothing beyond that.

They selected a dried up water channel that ran east-west and widened it. That was not difficult work and they felt cheerful.

They threw the bushes and grass into the island as they carried on with the clearing and the widening.

As they were heading homeward they could hear the loud voices of their children. They rushed to the spot, agitated. What awaited them was a big surprise. A cow was struggling to extricate itself from the slush of the pond opposite the spot where they collected their water. The cow was pregnant and was mired rather deep and the slush well above its legs. Even then it snorted violently warding off the men. It was a wild cow that had not known the touch of a human hand from the time it was born.

They made a muzzle with tough creepers and put it on the cow's mouth. Grandmother advised them: "My sons you can not overpower it with a muzzle. It is a creature of the forest. You hold it there and pierce the nose and then put a rope through."

As they pierced the cartilage with a knife the cow bellowed violently frightening them. It threw them into the slush. With a humongous effort the youngsters put a rope through and pulled it to the shore. The spectacle was comparable to that of a worm surrounded by forty or fifty ants, totally persistent, as the worm tossed and turned.

"Careful, be careful! Don't beat it. There is another life inside it. We want both" shouted the men with much joy. By the time they reached the temple they were completely exhausted. They had had enough of it. But the cow could not be calmed down.

They hammered in a peg and tied her. In a trice the peg was pulled loose and the cow began to run. Again the young men, staking their lives lunged towards it, fell upon it and calmed it. They pushed it inside a hut and closed it with a strong door crisscrossed by strong poles. By now it was totally dark.

They were so happy that night that some of them danced for joy. Pothanna too laughed.

19

A few were up even before the birds, the following morning. One of them picked up a burning log and went to the hut where the cow had been kept. As he shouted for joy the others too reached the spot. The cow was licking its calf, born just then.

"Now this cow will not rush to the forest. We should care for the calf, that's all" said grandmother.

'Govindappa, the goddess Lakshmi arrived in our village with a cow. Thanks to that auspicious hour the village overflowed with cows. And the village earned its name Gopalla because of that cow.

The calf got used to them and became friendly.

The cow used to dash against the mud walls. Her ears would perk up and she would try to keen some sound known best to herself. No one could feed her from close quarters and grass was flung in her direction from a distance.

The calf, a male, grew quickly.

It was Nagayya who persisted adamantly and also succeeded in befriending the cow. The cow grew to like his scent. Till the end he was the only person that she did not attack.

The island was not small, as they had initially thought. With the lust for land typical of farmers, it became quite a large area. The path surrounding the island was quite broad. The northern wind now began to blow steadily. This was the right time.

Even if the wind were to be strong the flames could not cross

the path. They were quite sure that the rest of the jungle on the other side of the path would not catch fire.

They chose an auspicious day. The fire was to be started at twelve noon when the sun was at its zenith.

At the southwest corner of the island they had piled up dry leaves and bushes over a large area. They threw wild castor seeds and neem seeds generously on top of the pile. That had been painstakingly collected by the young and old. They brought long batons, aflame at one end, from the fire pit. Before the burning batons were thrown on the dry pile grandmother prayed to the forest in a loud voice. "Spirits of the forest, its guardians, please safeguard us in this venture. Let nothing untoward happen."

Everyone flung the burning logs onto the heap. The oilseeds burst into smithereens. The fire spread fast with a crackling noise. It was as though the god of fire was gnashing his teeth as he fumed and swelled, in pure anger. The smoke rose to the sky.

The strong wind goaded the fire. The god of fire was ready to begin his feast of the forest.

The fire burned for three days and three nights. Strange animals came fleeing from that quarter of the forest, to escape the raging fire.

A thick snake more than two yards long, the colour of pure silver, slithered out.

They had never seen or heard of such a snake! Their remained wide-eyed and not a sound escaped their throats.

They saw a huge mongoose. Its body shimmered golden and it was milk white from neck down to belly. It had a long, really long tail, jet black and thick.

Fleeing hedgehogs would growl upon seeing men in front of them, their spikes erect like styluses. Young boys threw stones at them killing quite a few while the luckier ones escaped.

The wail of birds was truly heart-rending. A number of mother birds circled round and round above the smoking fire. They could not tear themselves away from their newly-hatched chicks and those not yet trained to fly. While some flew away, others persisted, flying round and round and burnt themselves falling into the fire.

A huge boar came out of the burning forest, grunting. Two teeth curled out pointing upward, resembling an elephant's tusks. Afraid of going near it the men pelted stones at it. The boar turned back into the burning forest and disappeared like fish disappearing in water. The men thought that it would certainly come out of the raging fire, sooner or later. But it did not appear. Perhaps it preferred death by fire to death by human hands.

For several days small fires glowed here and there. A strange smell lingered in the air for a long time.

They got down to work busy as bees. They were not able to level all the land in one go. There were hard stones and burnt tree stumps and a trellis of thick roots. It was years before the entire area became yielding earth.

20

The rains arrived early that year.

They made rough ploughs by chiseling wood and moved the earth. They sowed the grains they had, planting each seed. Then they covered them with soil, by trawling pads of thorn bush tied into shape with tough creepers. They had no animals or proper ploughshares.

When the seeds sprouted so did hope.

They toiled very hard. In response Earth Mother cast her gracious glance on them.

Even the seedlings were broad like sugarcane blades and of a dark green colour.

Everything grew so well. Countless millet grains were ripening. The crop was unbelievably fertile. The sesame plant came up to a man's chest. If one entered the cotton field one could not be found easily. Each plant was like a fully decorated temple car, with buds, flowers or fresh fluff.

They had a good crop that year. They harvested together and shared the crop. Then each family cured pieces of land according to its ability and began to cultivate them.

During summer they walked immense distances and began to communicate with other people in other villages. They bartered their produce in return for cattle and ploughshares.

They set up contact with similar people who too had come from the Telugu country.

They also got inter-related with such villages through

marriage. They encouraged craftsmen to settle in their village.

In the initial days language was a problem. As days passed this ceased to be so. Women and children of both sections learnt to speak each other's tongue in no time at all!

They erected houses. As the village grew the rain water was not sufficient for their needs. They made the pond wider so that their animals too could drink from it. They strengthened its banks, planted and tended trees with much care. These were those very trees.

The village assembly had decreed that each family should plant one tree in the name of that family. Thus trees were planted here and in many other spots in the village.

In those days the family with the highest number of members was considered to be the first family of the village. The larger the size, the better its resources to develop land and maintain a large herd of cattle. This in turn bestowed wealth on that family. The Kottaiyar were one such family.

Govindappa Nayakkar was surrounded by his betel-chewing companions. In those days only married men and women chewed betel. The younger lot watched the proceedings from a respectable distance. Many of them eagerly waited for the day when they could join them. They wished to talk like them through puckered lips, damming the flood of saliva streaking towards the jaw, even as a sweet drowsiness was descending on them.

Presently Chinnayya Nayakkar got up and cleaned his mouth of chewed betel. His mouth was a blood red and his face was ruddy. Under the influence of tobacco he had perspired on the tip of his nose. An expression of content was writ on his face. He would probe the crevices between his teeth and collect the betel nut bits on his tongue. He would then expel them from the tip of tongue. The expelled stuff would touch no one whatever the crowd. The briefest opening would do for him, even in a big crowd, to accomplish this task. He would not poke into the gums

with something sharp to remove the chewed stuff like the rest. His ears felt ticklish as soon as he spat out the betel. He would look for a fallen feather and clean it. In relaxed manner he would gently insert the cleansed feather tip. His eyes would close appreciatively to that sensation. After it was inserted to the right depth he would begin to twirl the other end of the feather with two fingers. Heavenly it felt, giving him indescribable pleasure.

The sight of Chinnappa Nayakkar drowned in this act of bliss was a source of delight for many. Every now and then he would suck in air with a hissing sound. When his pleasure reached a climax, he would forget himself and would be dribbling from both ends of his mouth!

When he became aware of himself he would quickly wipe his mouth looking to the right and left with a silly smile – as though his antics were ‘normal’

When he ‘treated’ his ears in this fashion Govindappa Nayakkar would ask “How is it going?” “The most enjoyable of acts” would be his reply, making the latter laugh silently. Neither was tired of the question or the answer.

Chinnappa Nayakkar had a lot of poultry. Wherever one looked in his house one could find a ear-cleaner feather struck somewhere ready of access. Four or five of them in the eating area near the stove, a similar number in the inner verandah where they sat and chewed betel, in the outer verandah where they gathered for a chat, in the store-room, cattle shed, here, there everywhere. The feathers were stuck in crevices in fours and fives so that they would never be missed!

Even as he talked to someone his arm would reach out for a feather and he wouldn’t be aware of it. And sure enough his hand would be ‘rewarded’.

His ‘in-laws’ began to call him cock-feather Chinnayya Nayakkar. In due course the reference became an honorific without which his name was not mentioned!

21

The man sitting next to Chinnayya Nayakkar was ‘Mannu tinni’ (Mud-eater) Renga Nayakkar. He had not earned this name because of eating mud as a child, as malnourished children were prone to. Renga Nayakkar was an adept at judging the quality of land and its strengths. If one wanted to buy a piece of land they would take him there to show him. He would take a pinch of mud from that piece of land, put it into his mouth and chew it. He would then tell them what would grow well there and what wouldn’t, whether it was fertile or poor.

Sitting next to him was ‘Nalla Manasu’ (Good-hearted) Tiravatti Nayakkar. The story behind his earning this title is also of interest.

Tiravatti Nayakkar was a young lad of fourteen or fifteen. He had a healthy body with toned muscles, hard like the wooden weights he practiced with. While walking on the foot trail he would never give way to the person coming from the opposite direction. He was firm that the other person should do him this honour.

They had cooked goat meat in his house of which he ate a good quantity. They had also fried blackgram vadai of which he ate at least a score. His body began to overflow with energy. He could hardly control himself of the urge to wrestle with someone.

He stepped down from his house and came to the street. Just

then Chinnattambi Chettiyar, son of the village grocer had entered their street with a black pot of sesame oil balanced on his head.

Tiravatti Nayakkar was too pleased. He had certainly met his match.

Chinnattambi too was a strapping lad. His each finger was the size of two average fingers in breadth. He ate his rice after pouring a ladleful of oil on it, and not a spoonful, like the rest. After he slept off his mother would regularly fill up a pot of rice, pour a generous amount of lentil and vegetable sauce and leave it by his side, along with a measure of freshly extracted sesame oil.

Chinnattambi would wake up in the middle of the night, come out and ease himself, his eyes almost shut.

He would then come in and head for the pot of rice. He would pour in the oil and eat huge handfuls. He would wash his hand in the pot and also rinse his mouth. Without bothering to dry his hand he would lie down and sleep off so that his night's sleep felt like a single and unbroken sequence.

Everyone had three meals in a day. Chinnattambi needed four full meals, and not one morsel less.

Tiravatti Nayakkar gestured to Chinnattambi to come near him, with a friendly smile. The latter obliged, as a mark of respect. He told him to keep his oil pot in a corner, which he did. Now, wrestle with me, he said and put his hand on his shoulder. Chinnattambi laughed and protested. What is this now, he said, you are behaving like a child. I have just finished my round in the near-by settlements and haven't had my meal. Let me go now, he pleaded, repeatedly. But Tiravatti Nayakkar was like a mad man, totally unreasonable.

He gripped Chinnattambi, threw him on the ground and sat on him. Chinnattambi wanted this bother to end. Now that you

have pinned me down leave me, he told him. Not at all, you have to do the same thing to me said Tiravatti.

Fine, he said, pushed him off and pinned him down!

A crowd had collected by now. Tiravatti shouted at the crowd. 'We are wrestling for fun.' He then told Tiravatti 'Now I shall throw you off and pin you to the ground. Beware!' But he could not shake him off!

Then Chinnattambi asked him in a whisper, 'Shall I give up?' That threw Tiravatti into a tizzy.

'Indeed you would! Is this why I asked you to wrestle? Just you wait,' said Tiravatti Nayakkar and used all his might. But Chinnattambi did not budge. He settled upon him like a good and proper Ganesha the Elephant God.

The crowd laughed. They rooted for Tiravatti and the latter tried his hardest. He accepted defeat gracefully and told Chinnattambi to get off.

When Tiravatti got up Chinnattambi dusted off the mud sticking on the latter's body with his own hands. Tiravatti appreciated this. "Adey, Chinnattambi you have a heart. You have a really good heart" said Tiravatti.

From that day he became Good Heart Tiravatti for the villagers.

The person sitting next to him was Peddakondhu Kottayya. He was given to talking at the top of his voice, thanks to the innate condition of his vocal chords. His voice rang like a bell and quelled high-decibel shouts by any number of men put together. Not many knew the reason for Kottayya's voice condition. His wife was so deaf that she couldn't hear even the sound of canon fire. So the shouting he did inside his house as a routine, he did outside his house also.

'Podikkaara' (Hot snuff) Kengu Nayakkar sat next to Peddakondhu Kottayya. His house was engaged in the

preparation of snuff. High quality tobacco was bought and ground in a stone trough and powdered fine with a seasoned tamarind wood pestle. The work was arduous because the work had to be done with speed and without pause. The snuff they made was famous in the adjacent villages also. They would give them kammam grass and happily take away snuff wrapped in leaf packets. And so he was 'Podikkaara' Kengu Nayakkar. Not only was he a user himself, he made it available for others also.

Kaaraveettu (Of the brick and mortar house) Lechumana Nayakkar sat next to him, on his haunches. His ancestors were the first to have such a house in the village.

The man sitting behind him was 'Kanganal' (Wrist-band) Cuppayya. He was also called 'Puli kuthi' (Tiger stabber) Cuppayya. A wrist band had been tied on him per ritual, during his marriage ceremony. After this was tied the groom was not supposed to do any work. However, a tiger ventured into the village from the jungle and also made it to the marriage venue ! While the guests ran pell-mell, screaming in fright, Cuppayya boldly pierced a stave into the animal, killing it, despite the stricture of the kanganal ritual. He thus became the proud owner of not one but two titles.

22

The first person sitting in the southern row was 'Padupaavi' Chenganna, hard-hearted one. Of course none used the epithet in front of him. There were four or five Chengannas in the village. A prefix was necessary for quick recall, after all.

Joint families were the order of the day when lands were family-owned. Gradually joint families began to break up. Legal heirs began to divide up property. When such a division took place in Chenganna's family, a pot was left, in which they used to prepare lime. Unwilling to give it away Chenganna was said to have broken it and given a half! After that incident the village called him 'Padupaavi' Chenganna.

Sitting next, towards the west, was 'Pachai vennai' (Raw butter) Narasayya. One would have normally thought that Narasayya was fond of eating butter. But the latter earned this title thanks to his habit of rubbing cow butter on his pate after a tonsure and following it with a warm bath. He found this so enjoyable that he began to rub it as a routine before his daily bath. He was always redolent with the smell of butter.

Next to 'Raw butter' sat 'Porai' (Shed) Bangaru Nayakkar. Big red oil-stained ruby ear-studs adorned his face. They went well with his swarthy face and physique. He earned his livelihood by ginning the cotton that he received from big peasants and the same was returned after the seeds were removed. He had thirty hand-operated blades in his house.

In Gopallapuram almost all houses had a hand-operated

blade and a spinning wheel. But it was not possible to deseed the huge quantities of cotton in large bales in one's own home. Bangaru Nayakkar took care of this work.

In those days cows and pregnant goats were given a generous meal of cotton seed. Bangaru Nayakkar would be paid with one bale of cotton in lieu of cleaning three bales into fluff and seed. One could also reward him with grain instead of cotton.

Thirty women laboured in his house from morning to evening. They were given two breaks and two measures of grain. This shed was the first-ever factory in that region.

At the end of cotton harvest they got busy spinning. Cotton was carded and threads spun. Weavers from neighbouring villages would buy thread. They knew the number of skeins that went into weaving one cubit of cloth per the weaver's standard. Some would have their *veshti* or sari woven from the thread they themselves had spun.

When they left the weavers carried bags of grain. When they came they carried bundles of woven cloth.

The bearded man sitting next to Porai Bangaru Nayakkar was Josyam Enkatrayalu.

In those days bachelors would shave for the first time only on the day of their marriage. Till then they remained bearded. Enkatrayalu did not get married. He had long back crossed marriageable age. And the beard stayed too. The only man who broke this custom was Akkayya. No one else had the courage.

Enkatrayalu's brother was sitting next to him. He too was growing a beard. He was married and his wife was with child. Men also stopped shaving when their wives were pregnant.

There was yet another 'beard' custom prevalent in those days. A few rare men limited the number of wives they married

to one. The community was insistent that a man marry at least two wives. The man with just one wife was an object of derision in the village. A man with only one wife would invariably marry again if he lost her. But some would be reluctant to spend their lives with a different woman, for the dead wife would have so entranced them.

Enkatrayalu could have married too had he wished. The reason he cited for his bachelorhood was the absence of the necessary planetary aspect in his birth-chart. He wasn't destined to marry, he said.

Rayalu had some special talents. These would 'shine' every now and then. He could correctly mention a man's zodiac sign from his manner of sitting. During a long journey from one village to another he happened to stop at a hospice for rest. Akkayya was also with him. Many men were sitting in the outer sitting area. Rayalu told Akkayya "Younger brother, you say that you don't believe in sooth-saying...Now, shall I tell you the birth-sign of every man who is sitting there?"

"Indeed! Let's hear it" said Akkayya.

Rayalu described each man, outlined the characteristics of men born under a particular constellation and guessed at his birth-star. Akkayya closely observed all the men sitting there.

One was sitting on folded legs his left hand planted on the floor, and the right hand on his hip. Another was sitting on his haunches, leaning the upper back against the wall and was hugging his bent knees close to the chest with his hands. His feet were suspended some four inches above the ground.

Yet another had extended his legs and had planted his elbows on the floor. His hands were closed into tight fists and embedded between his thighs. His back had 'collapsed' on the wall. In similar fashion another had extended his leg. But his left leg crossed the right. Fingers interlocked, his hands were placed in the nape of his neck. He leaned against the wall with

his back erect. Yet another had planted his right hand firmly on the floor and stretched out his right leg. His left leg was bent and he had stretched out his left hand and placed it on the knee.

One man sat on his haunches, crossing his arms at the knee. He was rocking himself gently, back and forth. Thus each one was found to be sitting in a distinct manner, none quite like the other.

Of the eleven men there only five knew what their birth-sign was. They were surprised by Rayalu's guess and accepted that he was right.

On a similar day Josyam Enkatrayalu and Akkayya were returning home. It had become quite dark. With some determination they could have walked on and reached home. But Enkatrayalu was not up to it. The two stretched themselves flat on the outer verandah of a house and slept off. The two woke up after midnight hearing the sound of the melam pipe and drum.

Akkayya looked around. There was a marriage procession and the bride was being ceremonially conducted to the venue of the marriage. Akkayya called out to Enkatrayalu, "Elder brother, why don't you have a look at the procession?"

The latter obliged. As he saw the bride he muttered, "Strange is this life" his voice holding a hint of sadness. He came back to the verandah and sat down.

"Tell me now, what is it?" said Akkayya. But Enkatrayalu refused to say anything further. When Akkayya persisted, he said "Dead body comes..." He would say nothing more.

On the third day, the bride, not even fully married (marriages were five-day affairs in those days) died, out of snake bite. The news spread far and wide.

Enkatrayalu settled certain marriages in a completely

strange manner. The wife of a certain villager died. They had a son seventeen years of age. There was no one to help run the house. The boy's father came to Enkatrayalu with the boy's birth-chart and requested his help to get the boy married. Rayalu saw the chart. He thought deeply, his hand stroking his beard as he did so. He then told the father "Why don't you marry?" "I have a son at home no longer amenable to my leash. So where is the question of I getting married?" said the father. Enkatrayalu told him "The marital aspect in your son's chart is not perfect enough. There is however one solution that can set it right. If you do that your family will be peaceful."

"There is nothing that you are not aware of. I shall do as you say" said the father.

On the day of the marriage he told the father to tie the taali around the girl's neck. The boy tied the taali after him! This was described as the 'Double-taali' sampradaya or tradition.

Many days had passed after the marriage. "What sort of marriage is this! Both treat her as their wife, I heard, and you arranged this" said Govindappa Nayakkar to Enkatrayalu, surprised and amused.

"What do you think I ought to have done?" Rayalu said.

"Why didn't you marry off the girl to the father?"

Rayalu laughed and it was tinged with sympathy. 'Oh, these innocent men!' he seemed to be thinking. "Whether it was the father, whether it was the son, the result would have to be this, that's happening now. Such was the star aspect. And there would have always been a clash between father and son. That's why I did this" said Rayalu.

Bullayya sat next to Rayalu. He was making a sketch on the floor with a finger explaining which part of the body of a cow needed to be branded and for what disease. He was the doctor who had solutions to all types of cattle diseases.

If an animal was the victim of evil eye he would rub medicinal leaves on it. On days when he did that he spoke to no one. Otherwise the herb would not be effective, it was believed.

He had to be informed the previous day if such a need arose. He would get up at the crack of dawn and walk, fast-paced, with an 'unwelcome' look on his face. He would be muttering something to himself.

His relations would try hard to get a few words from his mouth, just to tease him, when he would return with his treasure of leaves!

The leaves would be crushed and the juice squeezed on the cow's forehead. The streaking liquid would then be rubbed backwards down the spine, and down the tail after which he would snap his fingers. This he would do three times. Only then would he deign to do any talking.

Bullayya's herbal treatment was excellent cure for a number of problems that beset cows such as tswollen or bleeding udders, lack of desire for food or water and so on.

Vaagadam Bullayya did one more thing. He performed the bonding of cows that had lost their calves, with calves that had lost their mothers. This was far from easy. Cows have an excellent sense of smell. Even in pitch-darkness, it was not possible to cheat a cow and make her suckle a calf that was not her own. She would sniff and kick it away. So the pair to be bonded – the cow and the calf — would be taken away, separately, the calf far away from the cow's sight or smell. He would lead the cow himself and behind him another man would follow, at a safe distance, with the calf. He had a special spot chosen for this purpose, in the near-by forest, a spot covered by two thick trees. He would tether and tie the cow with ropes in such a manner that it would hardly be able to move.

He would hold his hands tight and push them inside the vagina. This would be painful for the cow. An onlooker would

be as much affected as the animal and wish so much that this infliction did not occur. Bullayya would push his forearms and widen the womb. The cow would suffer birth pangs and actually believe that she was going to give birth to a calf. Now Bullayya would signal to the other man to bring the calf closer and quickly withdraw his hands, coated with blood and mucous. This he rubbed on the calf, as the other man quickly removed the ropes that had tied the cow. The cow instantly approached the calf she had delivered and licked the baby with love!

The calf that had been kicked off the earlier day due to its 'alien' smell was today an object of her love, a calf that she herself had given birth to. The orphaned calf now gained a real mother.

The sight of the cow licking 'its' baby was a source of laughter for the men and women of the village.

A cow gave birth to a dead calf. Bullayya quickly ran into the flock of goats and located a lamb that was being deprived of milk since the mother had given birth to three kids. He put this lamb to the cow's udders.

The cow let the lamb suck and licked it lovingly. That was a sight that surprised the village to no end!

24

Sitting next to Bullayya was 'Payiruzhavu' (Crop-tiller) Bangaru Nayakkar. There was once an excellent crop of millets in the field of his sworn enemy Kotha Bavayya. Bangaru burned with jealousy at the sight of it. He swore against him silently, day in and day out. On a moon-lit night he removed the neck bells of his ox and ploughed deep in the field, without anyone's knowledge.

The village was aghast at this cruel deed. The lush green fields that had hidden every inch of the soil was now a black blanket, the crop crushed and covered by soil. The sinner whoever he might be, will surely eat mud, cursed the villagers.

Just one crop a year and that too is gone they lamented.

For a week the sun shone brightly and then it rained, very hard. And lo and behold! The crop burst forth, in countless shoots, as though with a vengeance! While the crop elsewhere was a light green this one was a dark green. It invited a plethora of descriptions from the peasants.

"It is like a ghou's slap"

"Your spittle won't hit the ground."

"It is pitch dark, inside."

"Even a fly can't enter into the field."

When the crop effloresced it was so thick that 'one could use it like a club and push a man to the floor.'

That year Kotha Bavayya reaped twice the normal amount of

grain and Kammam grass. Bangaru Nayakkar was too upset by the turn of events. He could control himself no more and shouted out: 'It was I who ploughed through the crop!'

The village forgave his ill-intentioned action since the effect benefited the 'victim'. He was made to bear the expenditure for the oil for the temple lamp for a period of one month.

So Bangaru Nayakkar the crop-tiller was hardly the 'noble' man who invented this method after due thought, the practice of which turned out to be a boon for this black earth. But the adage stuck to his name.

To the right of Bullayya was Vaiddiyam (Doctor) Manjayya, who constantly foraged for medicinal herbs. He was not capable of walking looking ahead of him since his head was always bent!

Manjayya knew about every little plant that grew there. He was always out hunting for a particular leaf or flower or bark.

'I find a plentiful growth of this-and-this plant this year. One may look forward to a plentiful of this-and-this disease,' he would declare. He vouched that there was, a particular day and a particular hour for plucking a particular herb. Some herbs had to be plucked from a certain direction, because directions mattered in some cases. And some could be plucked only after uttering certain specific words. His Saturdays were spent in one or the other spot on the Guru Malai ('Preceptor Hill') which he likened to the mythical Sanjivani Mountain. The breeze wafting from the hill was enough to ward off any disease, he'd say.

"When Hanuman flew above this land, holding the Sanjivani Parvata in his palm a piece of it fell and Guru Hill is that piece.

"The Siddhas come here for medicinal herbs. To this day they live in this hill, unseen by us.

"Once a hunter cut his hand badly. He was coming from one end of the hill to another. The wound kept bleeding and the

hunter kept wiping it as he walked with leaves that he plucked from here and there, along the way.

“When he came out there was no wound in his hand!

“Obviously, one of the several leaves with which he had wiped ought to have been the Sanjivani herb. But he had not noticed which leaf it was.

“He wanted to locate it, somehow. The following day he hurt himself deliberately, causing a wound and walked along the same path. He plucked a few leaves from every plant he saw along the path and wiped the wound. But he never found the plant.

“Such wonderful herbs are here in this Sanjivani Mountain also. They will be there in future too!” Manjayya would say.

It was a pleasurable event, to have Manjayya diagnose one's condition by touching the hand. He wouldn't begin to feel one's pulse as soon as one's hand was extended. He would gently stretch each finger and crack the knuckles. He would then hold all the five fingers together, close them, then open them, stretch... He would do this at least two or three times. Only then would he examine the 'naadi'. For the pleasure of this experience any number of men and women put out their hands before him!

The men showed their right hand and the women their left, to initiate the diagnosis. He would arrive at a final opinion only after examining both hands.

After removing his hand he would touch the ground with his forefinger with a trigger-like motion three times. A song would follow, in his sweet voice, describing the balance between the air, bile and mucous, their peaks and troughs. The solution too was expressed in song.

If the untouchables came to him for medicine he would use a fine silk cloth to cover their hands, before probing their naadi.

Vaithi Manjayya never asked his patients to convey what they felt. He would check first and spell out the patient's symptoms!

He did not torture the patients advising them to give up salt for a long period. In such cases he would give the patients a powder. A pinch of this powder, about the size of a mustard seed, would satisfy the craving of the tongue for the taste of salt. The food would taste as though it was correctly salted. To some he would advise a restricted diet, to include certain things and to exclude some. That, he would say would ward off all diseases. He would also advise a 'diet' of self-restraint for a few months to some men, and have them feeling fine at the end of that period.

25

The man with a bright red streak of *tiruman* (holy dust) on his forehead was 'Elavupetti' Ramayya.

After he returned from work Ramayya would bathe and without fail apply a streak of red on his forehead with *tiruman* as many of Vaishnavite persuasion did. Without doing so he would not eat his meal. He had a beautifully worked wooden box for it, a 'tiruman petti' as he called it.

He was something of a gourmand. When his wife rubbed his back during his bath he would ask her "Chinnakutti, what have you cooked today?" If the fare was to his liking he would coo in a lively manner, as he patted himself dry, "Chinnakuttee, bring that tiruman petti." If the food was not of his choice he would yell, "You! Bring that dirt-box here and get lost!"

'Kaayadi' ('Castrator') Kondayya sat near Ramayya. Akkayya however called him, more accurately, 'Kaaykadi' ('Ball-biter') Kondayya.

Kondayya always got a rousing welcome in the goat-pen – a 'royal welcome' and this was no exaggeration. They would bring the male kids before him for castration. He would place a fine piece of cloth, folded in two, on the testicle and bite it off at the top. Within a trice he would sew up the gash. It was certainly not the best of sights, to understate the matter, but the animal suffered a lot less. Before his method was applied the testicles would be crushed between two sticks, to a pulp, causing great distress to the animal and it would howl in pain.

Kaayadi Kondayya was a true deliverer, from such pain!

"None will dare wrestle with you!" Akkayya would say "You frighten all of us!"

The man sitting quietly next to him was Raghupati Nayakkar, still in a pall of sleep. He had the largest top-knot of all the Nayakkars assembled there. It was so large that women cast covetous glances on it.

Raghupati Nayakkar was truly devoted to work. Up at the crack of dawn when the cock crew, he wouldn't rest till it was time for the lamp to be lit. As soon as he stopped work he would be in the grip of sleep! Sleep and Nayakkar were highly compatible with each other like the legendary Kumbhakarna.

Not many knew of the confidential aspects of his life. He had been married for six years. Like most men in Gopallapuram he too had two wives. He had married his own sister's two daughters. Till the previous day there was no news of child.

Little did the villagers know as to the reason. For Raghupati Nayakkar it was too great a source of embarrassment.

When he was married the two girls had not attained puberty. That happened only after a year or so, one after the other.

It was evening by the time he came home. He would tether the cattle in the shed and go to fetch fodder of two types – the naathu or fodder from crop grown for human consumption, slender of stem and the sturdy thattai fodder cultivated essentially for animal feed - tying them into a huge bundle. He would call a passer-by and have the bundle placed on his head. He would then walk home. Thus finished his evening chore.

After placing fodder for the cattle he would get ready for a bath. He would come to the yard with a huge vat of warm water that he would carry with the help of one of his wives.

Even as his back was rubbed the 'deity' would mark its presence. It was a real task for the lady rubbing his back to carry on with her job and escape his clutches. A skirmish would

ensue, to the sound of bangles suppressed laughter and titillation. The wife would not only wipe her face with the sari-end but also her laughter and more.

Nayakkar would then sit down before his plate of rice like an innocent boy and eat his food silently.

After the warm bath, the big meal, the body craving its well-earned rest Nayakkar could not but help seeking out for the bed. The women came to join him much later, after serving food to the servants, the cowherd and the goatherd, relations, the washerwoman, the farmhand and so on, after which they ate their food. They heated the milk, set it for curd, fed the cattle a second time, checked the locks on the door, and at last reached the bed, relaxing after a relentless round of chores. By then Nayakkar would be sound asleep, to the accompaniment of a gentle snore.

The sisters would chew betel, dim the lamp and talk about the day's events in whispers. Soon they would yawn a couple of times. Their voices would sound thick and sleep would overtake them.

The first person to wake up to the call of the cock would be their mother-in-law. She would increase the lamp flame, keep feed for the cattle and start pounding betel leaf in her tiny pestle and mortar. By the time the morning minstrel crowed a second time, everyone's sleep would have deserted. When the sisters woke up to sprinkle cow dung mixture on the yard, Nayakkar's sleep would break. He would reach out and catch hold of any one of the two. "No...let go of my hand... it is morning now..." she would shake him off and slink away.

Cursing his sleep that almost smothered him Nayakkar would tie his veshti tight around his waist and prepare to start the first task of the day, which was to clean the cattle-shed...and the rest of the events followed as on other days...

26

Sitting by a sleepy Raghupati Nayakkar was Jalarangan with his markedly upturned nose and flaring nostrils.

His mother could not withstand the severity of pain when she was giving birth to him. Intent on killing herself to escape the pain she jumped into the tank. Many remembered that scene, her running in that condition.

As soon as she jumped into the water the baby came out. She wanted to live on after she saw the child. Holding the child aloft she cried for help. Luckily the water was not so deep. People ran to the spot and saved the mother and child. He was named Jalarangan because of his birth in water.

Kaltozhu Maragadayya arrived there just then. He was out the whole day and had just then heard of the assembly.

Almost all the important men had arrived and some were rushing to the spot. All were at the assembly except the young and the infirm. The village guards ensured that the children did not come near the assembly. They ensured that people did not go near the corpse, particularly women.

In the midst of the buzz of voices, Govindappa Nayakkar's voice rang out like a bell. "Has everyone come? Who is still awaited?" Immediately other sounds subsided. A new energy surged up in the crowd, for the meeting was about to begin. At that moment Parthasarathy Nayakkar who managed the Bhajana Matha arrived and went to sit near Govindappa Nayakkar. On

his forehead was a bright tiruman mark and he had a flowing white beard. Everyone made way for him in a respectful manner. Uttering Lord Rama's name he sat down placing his hand on Govindappa Nayakkar's broad shoulder for support.

Parthasarathy Nayakkar smelt like a temple. A wholesome and comforting smell, like camphor, surrounded him. "What a heinous deed, Govindappa?" he said, his palms joined together. Grief had etched itself on his face.

Parthasarathy Nayakkar was a soft-hearted man. Even simple matters caused him to break into tears. Whenever he 'confronted' the incident in the Ramayana when Rama called the humble boatman his friend he would lose himself and shed copious tears. He was a steadfast devotee of Rama and would be forever singing His names to the strum of a gourd tambura. As he sang, drowned in devotion, the phrase "Ramanamamu kalkandu" (The name of Rama is like crystal-sugar) everyone would be swept away in a flood of sweetness.

"Shall we begin?" Govindappa Nayakkar asked Parthasarathy Nayakkar, who nodded his assent. Govindappa Nayakkar scanned the crowd with his eyes and located Tiravatti Nayakkar. He signaled him to get up and told him, "Remove his ropes and bring him here." He pointed to a spot in front of the crowd.

Tiravatti Nayakkar did as told. He drew a circle in that spot and made him stand inside it. Now the young men became totally absorbed in the proceedings.

"Who are you? What is your name? Where is your village?" Govindappa Nayakkar asked him in a clear voice.

He did not answer. The questions were repeated, this time in a distinctly warmer tone.

No reply came forth.

The crowd became a little restive. A few faces registered surprise. Some eyes reddened with anger. Some were aghast at

the temerity of the man. They observed him acutely.

Suddenly an irate voice rang out, "Can't you hear? What are you up to?" A man rushed towards him with a raised hand. The younger lot were up on their feet immediately.

Govindappa Nayakkar calmed them raising his arm. "No one should touch him" he said firmly and looked in the direction of Parthasarathy Nayakkar. The latter nodded, in assent.

He now told his brother Krishnappa Nayakkar to tell the assembly all that had happened.

On that fateful day Krishnappa Nayakkar had gone to their fields that lay close to the road that led to Madurai town, to bring the harvested stalks. On the way to the second field he found that the iron strip hammered to the cart wheels had become hot and he thought that it might come off the wheel. So he turned the cart towards the pond that lay off Mangamma Saalai to splash water on the wheels.

'When I saw him I felt a sense of unease. Something was wrong here, I felt, but nothing was clear.'

'When that Achari came there I felt that his words had some connection to that spot.'

'I ordered him to leave the water and come out. Thank god, he obliged. Or else heaven knows what I might have done.'

'It was only after he came out that the gruesome occurrence became evident. She had bitten into his big toe. Obviously he must have pressed her into the water and stamped on her face...

Parthasarathy Nayakkar could no more control himself. He sprang to his feet and screamed in fury "You...you... sinner...scum..." He had to be calmed down by those sitting near him. He sat down, yielding to them and glared at the man, his eyes blood shot, pouring out pure anger, still out of breath. That was the way he reacted, boiling with rage, whenever a woman was subjected to injustice. Although a devotee of Rama,

the exemplar for calmness, he was a Lakshmana in losing his temper quickly.

The legendary act of Ravana's abduction and incarceration of Sita, Rama's consort, had made him a confirmed sympathizer of women. He couldn't bear to see the slightest of wrongs being inflicted on them.

"Elder brother... calm down, do calm down," said Govindappa Nayakkar, rubbing his hot shoulders, soothing him. When the noises died down, Krishnappa Nayakkar continued his narration and related everything clearly.

He sat down when ordered by Govindappa Nayakkar.

Then they called the Achari. The latter covered his face with his hands and sobbed before the crowd which muttered sounds of sympathy. Some wiped their eyes and their hearts melted for him. Some looked at the perpetrator with naked anger. A few were looking at the body of that hapless woman.

The Achari's crying became louder. Everyone felt an urge to console him. Parthasarathy Nayakkar uttered the name of Rama in a soft voice. Tears flowed from his eyes endlessly and teardrops were visible on his long white beard.

27

Govindappa Nayakkar called Josyam Enkatrayalu and whispered something into his ear. The latter then took the Achari outside the assembly and made him drink a bowl of rice water and buttermilk. He made him wash his face and limbs. After making him rest a little while they brought him back to the assembly, consoling him.

This was a village tradition. The close relation of a dead person would be escorted out of the scene by a villager, who would walk with him a certain distance. Then he would offer him rice water and buttermilk and bring him back.

Achariyar paid his respects to the assembly with folded hands. He could not talk at all. Tears flowed from his eyes. They made him sit down. He wiped his face cleared his throat and began to talk.

"Around this time yesterday, I couldn't have even dreamt that such a thing would befall me...This, this shouldn't be happening to me...

"This one...this one...who has gone away... is my paternal aunt's daughter.

"Crafting gold is our family calling. My name is Chokkalinga Achari. My village is Mayilodai which is near the Kayattaru river. From the moment we woke up this morning we were silently clashing with each other. The morning did not augur well. I never ever beat her, but this morning I could not help but slap her, though lightly, for I was really angry.

At night we did not behave in a companionable manner. I had returned home after ten days, in the evening. I was so looking forward to being back at home.

My paternal aunt lives in Manjakkinaru near Kayattaru. My cousin there, who is by tradition eligible to be my wife, had come of age three months earlier. I made a piece of jewelry for her and took it along. She did not like this. If she had said so in so many words I would not have made it...

I wasn't doing anything as charity. I did what I did in keeping with our tradition. She too would have become part of the family the day after if not the morrow. But...she changed her thoughts about me. She was in a resentful mood from the moment I returned."

Achari continued, this time on a high-pitched voice. "I want to declare before this assembly a solemn truth. If her spirit is anywhere here let it hear too. I have till today never touched another woman nor entertained such a thought.

But this wretched woman, she thought such a thing about me...

I have been married for five years. It is only now that she became pregnant...

I am the only son of my mother. I was hopeful of having a son. Now I no more think of a son, through her. No more will a lamp be lit, in my house. From my younger days I have loved her, she was my very life. And I was the same, to her. If you do not marry me and marry some other woman I shall jump into the well and give up my life she'd say. She married me, still she had to give up her life in water...oh my god...

With such love I made those pambadams for her... they have taken her very life!"

Achari peered at the ground for a brief while. He then shook his head. He sighed and got up, preparing to leave.

"Where are you going?" they asked him.

"Where am I to go?" His body shook. "Sirs, please remove the cloth from her face. Let me see her for the last time" he said. Everyone consoled him.

The assembly now got ready to discuss the rest of the matter.

Govindappa Nayakkar took a good look at the assembly and the murderer. His eyes were riveted on him.

The crowd waited for his words with bated breath.

Govindappa Nayakkar turned to Parthasarathy Nayakkar and asked him "Elder Brother how should we punish him?" He then told the assembly "We have no government above us at present. We are the government."

The crowd tried once more to make the killer talk. But his mouth could not be prised open.

Govindappa Nayakkar said "Adey! Don't think that you will escape punishment if you keep your mouth shut. Open your mouth and tell us what is in your mind. Let us also know."

His determined silence infuriated the crowd. The hot-blooded ones in the assembly had to be repeatedly restrained by the older ones.

Then the village deliberated on the punishment. First they thought of severing an arm or leg. Then they decided that he should die on a 'kazhu' stake.

Parthasarathy Nayakkar did not answer Govindappa Nayakkar's question. In the latter's opinion God alone could dispense punishment, not man. Were he to say so he would be laughed off! So he kept his mouth shut. As soon as the decision was announced he got up and left. Predictably he would be next seen strumming his gourd tambura on his lap singing the Rama nama and the world as we know would exist no more.

The village guards fetched two carpenters before the assembly which requested them to prepare a stake. The measurements were also given to them.

The stake was used in different ways to kill a person. A man

could be killed instantly or be subjected to a prolonged and agonizing pain before death came to him. There were set methods as to where the stake would pierce into the body and where it would pierce out of it.

At some distance from there was a neem tree with a mound near-by. They planted the stake here. Some four yards away from this spot they dug a pit in a southerly direction. They pulled the cart with the body in it to that spot and placed the body on the earth that had been dug out. Achariyar saw her face for the last time.

When they buried pregnant women who had died unnaturally they would cut the belly take out the baby and bury it next to the mother. Achariyar was opposed to the idea. "Don't ravage her body. Just bury her the way she is" he requested.

"In that case a resting stone should be placed on that spot" pointed out someone from the assembly.

"You are doing so much. You should put up that stone, it is not difficult for you at all" said Achariyar.

"Achariyare, we have no objection. We should do so after you complete the death rituals in your village, right?" asked some one.

"Village? My village? This mendicant has none. I am not going home. I am going to the north, to a different country."

This brought tears to the eyes of everyone. They then lowered the body into the pit. Achariyar threw three handfuls of mud and soon they shovelled the rest of the mud into the pit. Achariyar said "You, Mother, gave me food. I am giving you mud in return."

When the pit was half-full one man lowered himself and trod on it so that it got packed. When the pit was three quarters full they pressed in a lot of thorn from the berry tree and put more mud on top. This was to prevent wild animals like the jackal and the fox from making a meal of the body. The pit was soon

filled up. The spot was now a slightly raised mound of wet earth.

"Yours is done" said Achariyar. He turned away, walking briskly. He refused the invitation of Govindappa Nayakkar and other Kammalas to spend some time in their houses. When the pambadams were given to him he refused to accept them. He requested them to give them away to any poor Kammala woman who might be with child, who might be happy to possess them.

"Where are you going now?" asked Akkayya.

Achariyar replied that he would go to Kasi and walk it all the way.

"We have nothing to say about your chosen destination" said Krishnappa Nayakkar in a sad tone. "You have not bathed after burying her and you are leaving us with hunger pangs in your belly. Are you right doing it this way?"

"Dear people, please do not assume any other intention to what I am doing. You will never find yourselves in want at any time." He touched his sacred thread and lifted it for every one to see, to aver to the truth of his words. The next moment he was gone.

28

They brought him near the stake. They ensured that children and pregnant women were not anywhere near the spot. His hands were tied behind his back as also his legs. The stake pierced through his anus and emerged behind his neck. A frightening scream emerged from his throat. All this happened in a few seconds. The stake came out, about a cubit's length from the nape of the neck. They then untied his hands and legs.

From a distance it looked as though the man had perched himself on the cross-beam of the stake and was peering at the ground bending his neck.

Two men stood guard there with javelins, behind him. It was believed that the gaze of such a man should not fall on any one, for whatever he might say in that plight might come true. It was always ensured that a man was impaled on a stake facing away from the village.

The guards ensured that nobody meandered near the spot for two days.

In the still of the night his unearthly screams frightened the villagers.

"Water, water, give me some water..." he cried. One of the guards came inside the village and asked "He keeps asking for water. Should we give him?"

"Water?! That woman died drinking a good amount, enough for him as well. So, why does he want water?" said a few.

"Poor soul, why not give him some? He is dying, after all. Give him a mouthful of water" said the women. The guard asked Govindappa Nayakkar. "Whoever said that one should deny water to a thirsty mouth. Give it. Give him whatever he wants at this moment. Run, now!" he said. The guard came back to the man in a trice. He poured cool water in leaf sheath and extended it to his mouth. The latter put his mouth to the water greedily and sucked it. But he was unable to drink much.

He wept and spoke with great sorrow as though addressing some one somewhere "You! God-forsaken fellows! Don't kill women...Is much too sinful..." His face would twist as an extraordinary pain assailed him from some corner of the body.

On the third day some girls from the paracheri, the paraiya settlement adjoining the village ventured near the neem tree with their palm strip boxes, ostensibly to pick neem seeds.

The lively chatter of those girls – almost 'mature' but not quite so – lifted the pall of deathly silence that had enveloped the place. Though the 'kazhuvan', as a man impaled in a 'kazhu' was called, could not lift his head and see them, he could hear them, and that made a big difference to him, in that grim condition.

"Girls... come here..." he said.

The girls were surprised. They looked at the guards. They had presumed that he would have died by then. A few ran away, in fright. But a few were actually curious, to want to go near him and see him!

Cittayya, one of the two guards was a rather kind-hearted man. Moved by the Kazhuvan's immense suffering he asked him, in a kind voice "Teli me, fast, do you wish to see any one for the last time? Tell us quickly we'll do something."

Those kind words and affection apparently touched his heart. Tears fell from his eyes in a continuous flow. Unable to raise his

head or arms he shut his eyes tight to squeeze out the tears. He tried to give Cittayya a smile of affection even as tears streamed down his face. His nose and his lips twitched supportively in that effort but the intended smile eluded his lips. He tried to say something and tried hard to clear the phlegm from his throat. It was obvious that his end was not far off.

“Girls, come here” he managed to say.

The children were scared and curious at the same time. Cittayya urged them to go and hear him promising them of his presence and protection. Reluctantly the children came near the kazhuvan. Now he was able to see them. Addressing one of the older girls he said “Children, I am about to die. I have a wish. My pain is unbearable, Please sing a song in praise of god and do a kummi dance around me” he pleaded.

The girls were hesitant but the guards encouraged them. They put down their half-full boxes and went around the stake singing and dancing.

It was a song they sang for the goddess Mariamman when the women performed special austerities and lit the mavalakkus, lamps made of sweetened dough, for the goddess. The song came out of their lips embellished by their pronunciation and creative streak, in the kummi rhythm.

The song meant something like this:

In the Mariamman temple are / A hundred dough-lamps, a hundred austere women / A hundred sweet girls, a hundred sweet girls / Who do a graceful kummi.

Mari was born in Maanadu / Mari's children in the Kanchi Forests / Dear Muttumari do care/ For ones born in Kanchi forests.

With river sand you make rice / You make a curry of wild seeds/ And light a lamp with the firefly / Thus do you play dear Muttumari.

Do you see the climbing bitter gourd / So thick it spreads, the bitter gourd/ All are chaste women, and they're so many / Sing and dance a fine kummi.

Can you see the bottle gourd / Trailing so thick the bottle gourd / All are chaste women, and they're so many / Sing and dance a fine kummi.

Toe rings of five beads weight / Anklets of thousand jasmine buds / Tinkle in your feet / Virgin Bhadrakaali.

Stomach as flat as a banyan leaf / Lovely brows in a gracious face / My life's like a garden parrot's / In my village called Gopallam.

Mother was born in Ayotti / Her plait was done in Chaturagiri /Mother Neem was born in Venagiri / We came for play to Gopallam.

In the quarry where we cut stone / We made the fine cumin rice grow / Now the parrots shriek and flutter / Come flying and clap, my dear friend.

29

No one quite knew whether he liked the song or appreciated the dance. But the innocent voices and the words of the song did do something to him.

He moaned in great pain but it was not audible. Before his inner eye appeared the fierce-eyed Mariamman.

He recalled his kin who worked so hard bending and breaking their backs in hard labour squeezing out their very life juices. His mother would tell him "Wretch! Have you no heart? I ground every bone in my body like sandal wood and brought you up with such care... And you hit your own mother" she wailed.

He learnt to steal in his own house. When he grew up he did not go to work in the fields like others. He was lazy and became a vagabond. When there was no one at home he would steal into the house and eat up the food. Thus he began a career of feeding off others, a parasite. He learnt to gamble and smoke ganja. He began to take away things from the house one after another. He became a brute who beat up any one who crossed his path.

His behaviour could be tolerated no more. All his relations got together and took a decision to tie him up and beat him. They starved him for three days. They removed the ropes that bound him and drove him out of the village.

He knew nothing at all of the excruciating labour put in by the people of Gopallapuram and the near-by settlements, to transform the cactus and thorn jungle into what it looked today. Earth Mother glowed in golden hue, wreathed in smiles – like a new mother drenched in ritual turmeric water. Bottle gourd and bitter gourd creepers hugged a soil that had yielded only the red kovai gourd. But

Gopallapuram had not succeeded in cultivating rice. That part of the song came from the throats of Teeravaasam folk that had somehow grafted itself to the song of these people!

He remembered that he was born in Teeravaasam. There were people there too, like these people. That was a land that was cut up for red stone. They made it yield the fine grained jeeraka chamba rice. The stone quarry had changed into fields and forest, where one heard the endless shrilling of parrots.

He was a weed in the midst of honest men, a parasite. These thoughts ebbed and flowed as he approached closer and closer to the line separating life from death. The song pulsated with the joy of those honest men and women. In the midst of that joy he was dying, alone, removed from kith and kin.

Presently an extraordinary clarity touched him, the harbinger of imminent death. He looked at the children eagerly. May be he felt like jumping from the stake, to join them. A powerful convulsion shook his body. With that he bid good-bye to his mortal pain.

It took them a while to know that he was gone. The guards shooed off the children. The latter went away, casting backward glances. It was heard that some of them had fever that night. One girl even died following fever, it was heard. The condition of another child almost got out of hand. Her parents prayed to Kazhuvan to save her life. When she grew up, they vowed, and married and had her first male child, he would be named Kazhuvan.

The dead kazhuvan's body was drawn off the stake and buried near the body of the Kammaala woman. A stone was placed on that spot. The paracheri venerates the two as deities. They cook *pongal* on special occasions in that spot and have taken to naming their girl children as Kammaalacci and their male children, Kazhuvan.

The kazhuvan's extraordinary determination not to talk about himself before or after the decreed punishment gave rise to the expression 'the kazhuvan saadanai' ('the Kazhuvan achievement'). Even today when a criminal refused to confess to his crime or when some one refused to speak his mind the villagers commented "Here is another, who has equalled the Kazhuvan achievement!"

30

A different sort of day was ushered in by the dawn. The horizon was clear of clouds. A ripe red sun was slowly emerging. It was huge and its light pleasant on the eye.

In the cart track that branched off the Mangamma Saalai towards the village two men came riding on tall horses

They were new to the village and the language they spoke was new to this land. The man riding the black horse was an officer of the Company. A 'black' officer was riding the white horse. The latter was handsome and fair and better-looking than the white man.

The white officer wore a tall hat. Beneath it, close to his ears were thick side-burns of reddish hue. A red silk turban adorned the black officer. This man had no whiskers. He sported a thick moustache curling at the ends like the horns of a ram. His eyes were bright and large, and they could quell one with a mere look.

The white officer asked his questions in his own tongue. The black officer answered him in the same tongue.

As the two saw the rising sun they stopped in their tracks. It was a picture that could never stale. It was eternally new like a flower freshly bloomed. This sun, that did not hurt the eye, could be seen just as one could a young girl yet to reach adolescence.

This was a calm sun.

This sun was available only for a few seconds. One could not see him when he rode up the sky even slightly. He turned too fierce.

Truly captivated by the spectacle the white officer said "I have seen sunrises in the sea and mountain. It is only today that I see it rise on plain land. It is truly spell-binding. I had least expected this." The black man averred that the sight was indeed a source of wonder.

As they entered the village they saw piles of harvested foliage neatly piled up in hut-shapes in the fields.

"Are these huts? With neither window nor door?" asked the white man.

"No Sir, these are not huts. These are fodder stores for cattle. After harvest the farmers arrange the harvested stalks in this way, so beautifully and neatly" said the black official.

"Why take such trouble? They can pile it up the way they pile straw after they harvest paddy" said the white official.

"Oh no, Sir, if you think that hay stacks are random piles you are wrong. There is an order and a method there too. These crops, millets and corn, if piled like hay will rot in the rainy season and the cattle won't be able to eat them. So they are neatly arranged according to size, pressed with wooden planks to be shaped like walls and at the top placed in slanting position from two sides. *Sooritattai* stalks are woven together on the top as a protective layer for the stalks from rain and wind."

The white man halted at one store and properly examined it. He was overwhelmed by that 'creation' of the farmer!

But this was nothing compared to what the Teeravaasam men said when they saw these 'huts'. Till today the Gopallapuram folk laugh at the question they are supposed to have asked of them.

Two men from Teeravaasam went round and round such a store. What are you looking for asked the Gopallapuram folk.

We are wondering how the 'aakkai' man managed to come out, they replied.

When the roof of a house was woven one person stayed on the roof. He would place a palm frond and send in a strand of fibre got from aakkai grass through the tip of the needle from the roof. His partner who would be standing beneath the roof would take off the aakkai from the needle and immediately signal with a particular sound that he had done so. The man on the roof would pull out the needle and stick it in four inches away from the earlier spot. The partner would thread the aakkai through the needle and again give a signal. The roof man would pull out the needle and tie the two ends of the fibre really tight. Unless this was done the roof would not get tight grip on the frame and might slide down the slanting frame. Now, this method was necessary for making a roof. For securing a fodder store the peasants thought of a different means. Instead of aakkai grass they used the fibre of another grass called sooritattai that was 'plaited' across the top layers.

All this was surely beyond the knowledge of the Teeravaasam men, the poor fellows!

"Well, the man held the aakkai. But how did he come out?" they mimicked the Teeravaasam men and embellished it further to provoke more laughter. "He made the vadai alright and put a hole through it also, which is wonderful. But how did he manage to thread the vadai within?" they would say, when they found 'threads' in this deep-fried snack, made of black gram paste. The 'threads' appeared when the vadai had gone stale.

When the horses entered the street the dogs began to bark. Children made loud and cheerful noises. Women and old men gathered to see what had happened. A good number came out leaving aside whatever they were busy with at that moment.

The two crossed the lanes and by-lanes and stopped in front of the Kottaiyar house.

31

The cows were coming out of the Kottaiyar cattle-shed at that time. They waited for a while sitting on their horses.

The cows continued to come out. Of local breed they were of diverse hues their horns curving in more than one style, with neck bells tinkling in different pitches.

"Quite a number!" remarked the officer.

"Yes, their wealth is their cattle and land. The Kottayar family on whom we shall be calling now are the richest here."

They drew back their mounts to a corner of the road since the cows were upset by their presence.

They thought of going in after the cows had left the shed. At that moment the buffaloes began their exit. They smiled to each other at this unexpected development.

"What would be the quantity of milk that these animals yield?"

"Here they don't measure the yield of milk. They believe that it should not be measured. The milk is collected in vessels and small pots. A cow may yield on average two *naazhis* of milk."

The white officer did not know how much a *naazhi* was. The black officer was wondering how to explain a *naazhi* to the white man. At that moment two of the buffaloes began a mutual combat.

When two rams clashed they would first step back and then

clash at each other. But that was not the case with buffaloes. They would stand where they were and each would press the other from the top of its horns with all the strength it could summon, intent upon pushing away the other. The defeated buffalo would then step back and run, oblivious to its surroundings. Anything lying in its path would be pummelled to dust. So people were quite careful and they watched the fun from a safe distance.

The two horsemen also removed themselves from the path and watched the happenings from a distance.

The two buffaloes clashed as equals. None could predict the victor.

Suddenly one of the animals turned back and ran. The victor stood at the same spot. The white officer said something in his own language, left the bridle and clapped his hands.

The black officer now said "When the vanquished animal runs away the victor does not pursue it. But why is it not so of man?"

The white officer deeply appreciated the question and its inner meaning.

"Just as men have some truly noble qualities so have animals."

After the commotion caused by the moving cattle ceased the two went to the Kottaiyar house.

Govindappa Nayakkar was momentarily taken aback by his unexpected visitors. He collected himself and made good to welcome them.

After the introductions the white officer shook hands with Govindappa Nayakkar. It was a new and rather strange experience that escaped articulation.

The visitors were offered milk to drink. The white man thanked them and was all praise for its taste and smell. He was

explained as to the reason for the high quality of milk in these parts. It was because of the fresh grass that they grazed on and the feed made of cotton seed and millet stalks.

As a mark of his visit to the place the officer presented Govindappa Nayakkar with a sword made in the foreign land. Govindappa Nayakkar was beside himself with joy!

In a while the white officer told Govindappa Nayakkar that he had to talk to him in private. It was with some difficulty that the crowding villagers were removed from the scene.

The black officer translated the one to the other.

"The white lord has come to appoint you as revenue-in-charge of the village. He wants your opinion in the matter" he told him.

Govindappa Nayakkar's face revealed his sense of shock at this suggestion. His face became red. He looked at his brothers, who were standing at a distance and had no clue as to what was being said. But Krishnappa Nayakkar sensed that their elder brother was seeking to consult them urgently.

32

“Please give me some time. I shall think it over and tell you” requested Govindappa Nayakkar. They agreed.

After they left they thought over the matter. Akkayya did not participate in their deliberations. He busied himself examining the sword they had left behind. He checked the sword on other iron surfaces. The sword shaved them effortlessly as though it was moving on wood. Akkayya collected the shavings and showed the others.

The whole village was agog with the news of the visit of the Company officer.

Govindappa Nayakkar summoned all the leading voices of the village to his house and discussed the proposition.

Most of them were too stunned to decide either way. The stalemate was broken by Chicken feather Chinnayya Nayakkar. He turned his face as though he had tasted something excessively sour. “That fellow...” he said “his face has no attraction at all...He is like an albino rat...”

There was much laughter at these words. Pettakondur Kottayya followed his cue. “The other man now...who came along... he has the bearing of a ruler...”

Every one liked the ‘black’ officer.

Did you see that white man’s eyes? How come it is like that?

Well, these men here have always feasted their eyes on the large black eyes of our women. No wonder his eyes look

strange thought Govindappa Nayakkar.

They were aware that Company men ruled in the country and had gathered a lot of territory where they ruled. Govindappa Nayakkar felt an urge to convey the matter to Mangatayaru Ammal and seek her opinion.

Other important men were in agreement with him. Mangatayaru Ammal was silent, not proffering her opinion.

Then clearing her throat she asked them a question. “Well...this white man has been in this land for many years. Has he troubled our women like the muslim kings?”

Every one was impressed by this poser for it was an expression of a cardinal principle of justice.

Had they not fled their Telugu country for that reason? And they had so far not heard that the Company men had taken away their women or raped them. For this one reason the Company man loomed tall before them.

Bhuma Devi (Earth Goddess) too was a woman. One who respected women could be expected to respect Earth Mother too, said Mangatayaru Ammal.

Every one accepted this train of thought. They sent their acceptance to the Company.

33

Often one saw the Company soldiers marching down Mangammal Street. They were accompanied by many men bearing head loads.

Their demand for such labour grew by the day. They came to Gopallapuram also and looked for men. Initially the villagers responded with enthusiasm. But as days went by their calls became a nuisance. The soldiers, they complained to Govindappa Nayakkar, did not treat them respectfully. This upset Govindappa Nayakkar.

Hundreds of men came down from the north bearing headloads. As soon as they reached the outskirts of their village they went off. Men from their village would carry the load to the next demarcated spot, for another lot of men to carry.

To escape this nuisance the villagers resorted to numerous stratagems. They would stick pieces of wet palm molasses here and there on their limbs and old cloth around them like bandage. Attracted to the molasses flies would cling to the bandaged 'wounds'.

The white man did not want such men in his entourage.

But every one could not resort to this trick for surely that would give them away. Akkayya tried another trick. He made them tie bunches of neem leaves in every road leading to the village and told them to put a sprig of neem leaves at the entrance door of every house. Metal pots filled with water and neem leaves were put in the middle of every road and almost all

the houses.

The white man was extremely scared of pox and ran away at the mere mention of the word. They knew that the prominent presence and display of neem sprigs was a way of informing the others of an attack of small pox in that area.

The villagers composed a lot of nonsense rhymes about the white men. One ditty went like this:

Ai chakka ai

Araipadi nei

Vellakaaran toppiyile

Vilakkai porutti vai

Varaanda varaanda

Vellaikkaran

Varattum taayoli

Toppikaaran

(Ai Chakka ai/Half a seer of ghee/ In the white man's hat/
Light a proper lamp/ He's coming, he's coming/That white man/
Let him come that mother-fucker / That hatted man)

Gopallapuram and the surrounding areas remained impervious to change even after many years of Company rule.

If one wished to point out to any change at all, such that one could, one could mention the appearance of a comet. Seeing it Josyam Enkatrayalu proclaimed pithily: "Evil eclipses our land."

days Engacchi was accorded a royal welcome. The Kottaiyar women were never tired of asking her and clarifying their doubts about the preparation of this or that item of food. As a proverb goes, aptly, the doer cannot narrate and the narrator cannot do!

Engacchi thought that the praise she received was uncalled for. One day she had called on the Kottaiyar family casually. The women persuaded her to have her meal with them. The men had eaten and the women were about to eat. Engacchi yielded to their entreaties and sat down. She began to eat after *kuzhambu* was served.

She had made a paste of the rice with her finger tips and mixed in the *kuzhambu*. She put the rice into her mouth and said "Sitamma, bring that vessel of *kuzhambu* here; also fetch the *ruchikkal* (literally taste stone, salt) she said. They brought the *kuzhambu* and the salt, kept in a wooden jar. She took out some salt and threw the excess into the jar with her thumb. She threw the salt into the *kuzhambu*, mixed it, served herself and told the others to take helpings.

That had a magical effect! It gave out a fantastic smell and was no longer the *kuzhambu* of the Kottaiyar kitchen. Marvellous was the power of a grain of salt. Small wonder, that salt was called *ruchikkal*, the taste stone.

Seetamma told her "Engacchiakka, you did not merely add salt. You added a magic spell though we saw you adding only salt!"

The spinach, almost regarded as a weed, tasted like ambrosia when she cooked it. She knew a hundred ways of cooking that humble leaf.

Govindappa Nayakkar was devoted to a dish of spinach. It was almost as good as their family deity for him! "Engacchi's spinach is what one should eat" he'd say clicking his tongue in appreciation of an imagined dish of that leafy vegetable.

35

Sreeni Nayakkar began to eat.

Seated close to him Engacchi served him small portions repeatedly and watched as he ate. She took great pleasure in watching him savour her handiwork and feeding him more and more, sweeping aside his remonstrations. She was like that in everything she did.

Engacchi felt a sense of inferiority since she was dark-skinned. But she wasn't quite dark though it did seem so in the presence of the Kottaiyar women. Her skin was of a 'common' hue.

She swooned at the skin colour of Sreeni Nayakkar. Couldn't you give me some of your colour, she would tell him, with her hand on his.

A pink or red skin was of many types - it could be riveting, overwhelming, frightening, aggressive and so on.

Engacchi never tired of appreciating his complexion. She would run her hand on his skin and enjoy the feeling. Parts of the body untouched by tan would be extra fair and so soft. She would gently feel his skin with her lips and cheeks and smell it too. Sounds of endearment would come from her lips instinctively in Telugu.

Sreeni Nayakkar would place her on his shoulder and hold her feet in his left hand. He would walk thus carrying her, stretching his right hand out.

When he hoisted her to his shoulder, like holding a bouquet she would laugh in a certain way. He hoisted her in anticipation of that laughter. "I will keep you right there and am going to hop on one foot" he would say. She would laugh and slide down his body. It was such pleasure when bodies rubbed each other!

It was at this hour of pleasure after their morning meal that the sun's rays dimmed and the sky darkened.

The foraging chicks began to march towards their coops.

Engacchi's parrot shrieked from the cage.

The couple rushed towards the yard at these forebodings.

36

Sreeni Nayakkar and Engacchi were shocked by what they saw. Their favourite curry leaf tree was fully covered by grasshoppers.

They did not know if that was the right name for those insects. Even as they watched the tree was completely denuded of leaves!

Each one of these grasshoppers was a cubit long, if not slightly less. They had never seen such a creature earlier in their lives or heard of it.

Engacchi was frightened and hugged her husband. Was the end of the world close by?

When the end of the world approached it would perish in a deluge, it was said. It would rain without end, for days. Each strand of rain would be as thick as an elephant's trunk. But never had they heard that grasshoppers would destroy the world.

Sreeni Nayakkar shook off his wife and beat away those insects. The once-lush plant was a stump with a few denuded veins.

His throat choked. Wherever he turned there were these creatures making clacking sounds.

The whole village looked like a honey comb into which these insects had homed. Soon one heard cries of human distress. Men and women wept loudly, beating themselves on

their chests and face, utterly helpless.

Men sitting at a height to guard the ripe millet crop were stunned at what they saw. They tried to drive off the insects hitting them with sticks and creating loud noises. Soon the crop disappeared and the insects remained. The fields resounded with the sound of leaves being crunched

It was difficult to kill it. Its serrated hind legs created a bloody wound when caught.

'Good Heart' Tiravatti Nayakkar was guarding his crop. The crop was good – not only in his field but everywhere. He had thought of cutting it the next day when such an event took place.

He tried to drive them off. He beat them with the cloth he had tied on his head. Some died, some became still but leave they did not. Such was their hunger!

He ran here and there for help. It was the same story everywhere. Nayakkar got tired.

With a single crop a year how does one welcome the Tai month the month of festivities for a farmer. There was no food for man, no food for cattle. There was only doom in front of them.

"Ayyo Devuda..." he wept throwing himself on the earth. It was like a child crying inconsolably when it was deprived of goodies by a thieving crow.

The farmers ran from their fields towards the village. They saw the same dance of destruction all along the way.

Even from a distance they could see them, covering the tall trees around the tank covering every leaf.

They covered the roof tops.

Frightened, most of them locked themselves in.

37

The locusts disappeared in the same manner that they had arrived.

As proof of their visit one saw their droppings under the trees and the total disappearance of greenery. The colour green did not seem to have ever existed there. Even the tiniest blade had not been spared. The palm trees became so many monstrous-looking pestles, naked of fronds. The village looked like an unraveled wedding pavilion.

A feeling of surprise and fear haunted all of them. Then they succumbed to unbearable sorrow. Who would console whom? Who could one blame for this?

The plight of the village broke one's heart. The Kottaiyar brothers were moved. They called every one and consoled them. They opened their granaries for the village.

"Keep enough for our use and for seeds. Measure out the rest for the others" instructed Govindappa Nayakkar to his brothers. They also gave away several of their huge stores of fodder for the cattle.

Said Enkatrayalu, "Govindappa, thanks to you we can at least sip gruel."

"Do not say so. If we have enough grain is it all ours? In those days didn't all our ancestors get together to tame this tough earth and make it into a field?" said Govindappa Nayakkar, always his humble self.

38

The help rendered by the Kottaiyar family alleviated the locust famine to an extent. It did not entirely solve the village's distress.

Govindappa Nayakkar conveyed to his higher authorities of the calamity that had befallen the village, per procedure. There was no response from the Company. Once again the village folk began to hear of murders and atrocities. No news reached them that instilled hope in them. They heard of a lot of things. They had no means of sifting lie from fact.

They heard that the white man cut off the thumbs of those who spun thread on a spinning wheel. That's strange scoffed the villagers at that bit of news albeit with a touch of fear.

The white man cut off the head of anyone who spoke against him, went another rumour.

"We can not pluck two cucumbers growing in our land and give it to some one without his permission," said one. "Isn't that strange?"

In the midst of all this floated another piece of news. That the chief Kattabomman of Panjalangurichi had been brought near the Kayattaru river and killed and that his body had been suspended from a tamarind tree. The reason for his being killed was his opposition to the white man, it was said. In revenge his brother Oomaiturai killed ten white officers and had the bodies hanged from a tree.

Men spoke both for and against the Company.

Akkayya asked, "why should he come from a distant land across the sea, subdue us and rule over us?"

He has rifles and gunpowder. And huge canons. A single shot from a canon can destroy a town, someone said.

"That is the brahmastram. As long as it is in his possession, none can defeat him" said Bhajanamatam Parthasarathi.

"We should not be caught in the white man's lair" said Akkayya.

We have given him our word and we can not transgress that, thought Govindappa Nayakkar and others.

A few months later, the same two officers of the Company came to the village – not by themselves but accompanied by a battalion. That was the first time that the villagers saw a rifle and they were much amazed.

That was a truly frightening weapon for those men familiar with catapults, arrows and metal-tipped stakes.

There were black men in the battalion now. It was said that the white man found it exceedingly tough to train them. Akkayya had a fund of stories about this, each funnier than the other.

The white man would make these men stand in a row and would stamp his feet on the earth, now one, now the other, just like a potter kneading mud with his feet. He would then command them to do the same.

As they did that he would keep saying 'Left, right, left, right'.

'Now, left right is their language. How are these donkeys to know this. They simply did not stamp the 'right' foot at the right time, in unison. Now that man is a tricky fellow. On their left

leg he tied a leaf sheath and on the right, a piece of cloth. Now these fellows also began to stamp properly, saying aloud, 'Olakkaal, Seelakkaal' (meaning Sheath leg, Cloth leg), said Akkayya.

Parthasarathy Nayakkar felt that it was not right at all to be stamping on Mother Earth for no reason whatsoever.

39

It was the year 1858. Queen Victoria issued a proclamation that she was taking over the rule of the Company in a bid to bring peace to the Indian people and to attempt a reconciliation with them.

The task of bringing the message to the people and the village officials was entrusted to responsible officers of the Company. Thus had they come to their village, again.

All the important men of the village had gathered in one spot. They read out and explained the proclamation.

They were assured that people would no more suffer wants and that the government would not interfere in matters of religion. 'Do not fear that the white man follows a different religion. The government here will not interfere in religious affairs. You all have complete religious freedom.'

A feeling of happiness, quite unfounded, arose in those men to hear that Company rule was over and that they would be ruled by a queen!

They recalled the days of Rani Mangamma.

They had heard of this queen from her forefathers and were themselves eye witnesses to the good things that came to them during her reign.

For no rhyme or reason a funny imagination arose in the mind of Govindappa Nayakkar – that Queen Victoria would perhaps bear a close resemblance to Rani Mangamma. But his

knowledge of the Rani was entirely based on Mangatayaru's narrative.

There was a popular story as to the laying down of the road named after her – the Mangamma saalai.

One day the Rani was engaged in consultations with some important persons. In front of her was a 'tamboolam' box with betel leaves and the necessary accompaniments. The servant who prepared the leaf for the queen was not there. When important meetings took place servants were not allowed anywhere near the area. A betel nut was being turned round and round between her four fingers – the left forefinger and thumb and the right forefinger and thumb – a 'victim' of the deep thought that its mistress was seized of.

The Rani was carefully hearing every word that was being said with deep concentration.

The nut would stay awhile in the right hand fingers. Then it will cross over to the left. Then it will be back in the right. Thus it rolled right to left, left to right. The Rani heard every one. Suddenly the decision flashed in her mind. Unaware of what she was doing she popped the nut into her mouth from the left hand where the nut had transferred itself at that particular moment!

That stunned every one including the Rani.

Now – how to propitiate for the wrong act of eating an auspicious item from the inauspicious left hand, leave alone in the presence of an august assembly. The Rani then laid out this road, the Mangamma Saalai, in atonement.

Mangatayaru Ammal never accepted this story. She would gently shake her hand in disagreement. Then she would lower her voice and say "Not many know of the truth. I knew about Rani Mangamma when I was a child. We have even spent a few days in her palace. The Rani was incapable of using right hand

efficiently the way we do. She was left-handed. Many did not know this!"

Whatever that might have been she did a good turn for the people. That was a good queen, thought Govindappa Nayakkar.

Queen Victoria assumed a greatness before them thanks to their celebrated queen Rani Mangamma.

They took up the matter of the locust infestation and the suffering it caused to the villagers. They also heaped praise on the Kottaiyar for their timely help and thanked them. They assured that the government would not, in future remain insensitive to such crises.

None should side with enemies of the government, they said. Rumours must not be heeded. That by tradition they were a loyal lot. Empress Victoria had sent them there to assure them that she would do everything for their welfare.

The assembly felt that this was a good thing. With unanimity they reposed their faith in the queen's rule.

As days passed, this faith got destroyed, little by little. The white man's government was unable to sense the people's longing for freedom – in that village and in the land where it was – a longing akin to the fire glowing under a veil of ash. None realized that it was the calm before the storm.
